

Remembering Dr Keith Panton a true Servant Leader

Synopsis

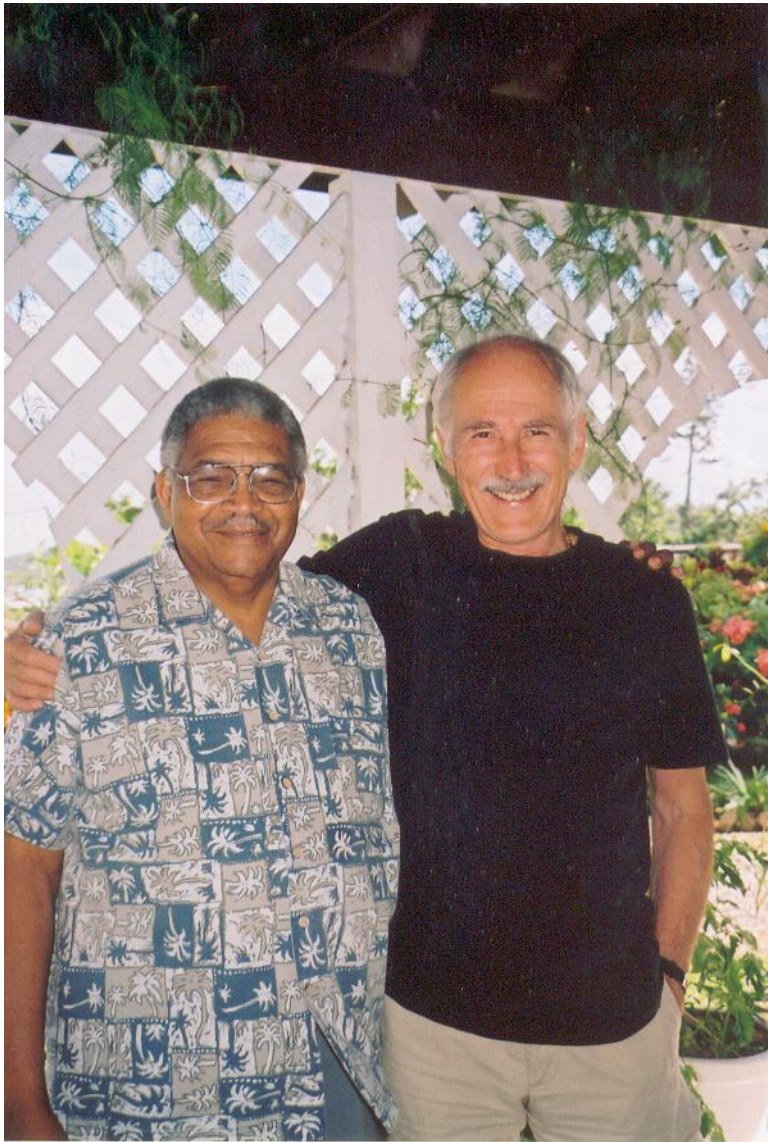
This is the story of how I met Keith when we were both young men and formed a lasting friendship. He was not ambitious in the ordinary sense, just enormously talented. He cared about his employees and country. He became the first black Jamaican to become Chairman and Chief Executive. He saved Alcan Jamaica from closure and contributed to his country in many other ways. We remained lifelong friends. There are excellent servant leadership organisations in the UK <http://www.greenleaf.org.uk/> and USA <https://www.greenleaf.org/what-is-servant-leadership>.

Remembering Dr Keith Panton a true Servant Leader

Early in January 1960, newly married, my wife and I flew to Jamaica on a Bristol Britannia that stopped off to refuel at Montreal in a snowstorm and then another stop in hot Bermuda. It was the start of an adventure that profoundly influenced me. I was to be personnel officer, helping to set up a personnel department at Alcan Jamaica's (Aljam's) newly-opened Ewarton plant. We started in a dusty hut before air conditioned offices were built. Two years later, Jamaica became independent. It was a time of great optimism, and we became very involved in Jamaican life. Two of our sons were born in Jamaica.

Three years later I moved to another personnel role in Aljam's Kirkvine Head Office near Mandeville. But in 1965 we decided to return to UK. We wanted our two children to be nearer their grandparents. I had thought of staying in Jamaica, but I felt it made no sense for me to occupy a job for which there were equally or more able Jamaicans. That's when I met my successor Dr Keith Panton. I helped induct him into his new role. We immediately clicked. We were two young men – he a black Jamaican, I a white expatriate. We realised we had very similar values and hopes.

Soon after my wife and I set up home in UK, a large box of oranges arrived from St Elizabeth - Keith's roots were in St Elizabeth and farming. We lost contact until many years later when I wrote to Keith at a PO Box address in St Elizabeth. To my astonishment, I received an invitation from Keith to come out to the celebration of 40 years' operation of Alcan in Jamaica. It was a fantastic event! When his son, David, and his daughter, Beth- Sarah, did post - graduate degrees at Oxford (as a Rhodes Scholar) and Cambridge respectively, our two families became friends, exchanging visits.



By then Keith had become Chairman and CEO, the first black Jamaican in that role which he occupied for 12 years – the longest ever tenure. He saved the company from closure using German productivity improvement measures.

But German productivity methodology was not the only thing that saved Aljam. After listening to the Aljam President saying, again and again, why Alcan should remain in Jamaica and others saying why Alcan should not be in Jamaica at all, the Chairman decided to bring matters to a head. He invited Dr Panton and Dr Panton's boss in to his office to make their different cases - Keith to keep Aljam open and running, and his boss - the Director of Raw Materials, to close it.

Very few people in the island knew about that momentous meeting. All we knew was that we came to work as usual, the plants kept running, and Ewarton Works went on to record production levels.

The master negotiator had won!

Keith had strong views on education. He believed that the Company could do more in this area, and he decided to do something about it. He introduced a programme where any employee's child who qualified for University could attend and get Company support. This was not only a benefit for the children of Aljam employees; it was also a major contribution to education in Jamaica.

Keith was a quiet visionary. He spearheaded the development of the Aljam vision, the by-line of which was - "Quietly achieving important goals".

The country's foremost orchidologist highlighted to him the fragility of the Island's flora and the effects of bauxite mining on the delicate plants. He established sanctuaries for the tiny orchids that were found only in Jamaica. Located at the Ewarton and Kirkvine mining areas, they were popular stops for tourists travelling from north to south coast.

His sensitive concern for Jamaica's fragile environment went further. He established "The Alcan Chair for the Environment" at the University of the West Indies and secured a distinguished professor to be its first occupant.

On my second visit, Keith took me all over the Island he loved, including some of Jamaica's beautiful architectural heritage and one of the orchid sanctuaries.

After retiring he worked as a management consultant. We worked together on an assignment for the University of the West Indies in Kingston and I did research for him at Oxford. Sometimes he just helped people out, like the man who came to him after losing his roof in the hurricane.

While at Aljam, he was ordained as an Anglican priest and, after retiring from Alcan, he was appointed Executive-in-Residence at the University of the West Indies in Kingston, while continuing his ministry. He was awarded the Eisenhower Exchange Fellowship, joining a distinguished and select group of global leaders. The Government of Jamaica also honoured him for his service to the country by awarding him the Order of Distinction in the Rank of Commander.

My memory of Keith is of a really lovely man, generous, very humorous, humble, not ambitious in the ordinary sense, just enormously talented, and a true servant leader. He had a big influence on my life, work and writing. I admired him enormously and feel blessed to have known him.

By Bruce Nixon with key contributions from Ransford Neil, formerly Keith's Corporate Relations Manager. This article is based on an article first published 9th October 2015 in the Rio Tinto Emeritus magazine.