



## An Institution Called Bowie

At 7:30 pm on Friday, March 11, 2005, Mrs Marguerite Elaine Bowie, having cleared her desk, ensuring that every detail was in place, leaving only the necessary *Information for the New PS File* on the desk, took a last look around the room in which she had spent 10 years as PS, breathed a sigh of satisfaction, turned out the lights and closed the door — to an era.

She strolled down the stairs leisurely, perhaps for the first time glancing back every now and then at the walls of the institution where she spent 38 years of her working life. What was going through her mind at the time...? Perhaps the sigh was a sigh of satisfaction that she had given it her best shot and did the job with diligence. Perhaps it was a question of what could I have done differently...or what missing detail have I not taken care of...?

One thing I know for sure, she was not thinking of what awaited her at the foot of the stairs...That a chauffeured *carriage*, an 'out-driver' and a guard of honour flanking her *carriage* from the door of Building One to the gate, would be how she took her final walk from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Culture was farthest from her mind.

Very few people noticed the tears welling up in her eyes as she stepped gracefully, yet humbly into her chauffeur-driven Volvo amidst thunderous and sustained applause. It was like a curtain call after an impacting and scintillating performance and Marguerite Bowie took it all in strides and waved like a queen bidding adieu to her constituents or like the Catholic priest blessing her congregation. What a way to leave an organisation!

It was an emotional moment. I stood there waving and cheering, with tears smarting my eyes and watched a woman whom I admire, respect, love, and even idolize, leaving in a blaze of glory, at 7:40 in the evening. Who else would have retired from an institution long past the 5:00 pm hour? Truth be told, many of us would not have come in on that day. Such is the measure of the woman.

But to be able to make such a dramatic and memorable exit from the stage of work, one would have had to give an equally dramatic and memorable performance: One would have had to live, serve and touch lives in a positive and indelible way; one would have had to command the respect, admiration and love of those with whom one served; one would have had to treat one's functionaries and colleagues with utmost respect; one would have had to give unimpeachable service with unquestionable integrity and depth of character; one would have had to give value and be value to the institution in which one served. Marguerite Bowie did that and much more ... She is an institution in the Ministry of Education Youth and Culture. When she drove through that gate, on that evening, I know I was also witnessing a significant amount of an institutional memory driving away with her and even as my heart was an aching hole, I recognised that the memory core of the institution would also be a gaping hole...

That Marguerite Bowie is a reservoir of information on the public sector and administrative/educational policies, programmes and procedures is no moot. We all went to her for details we needed to complete a submission, a decision or a profile etc — the route of requesting and using the requisite files was so much longer and more complex.

For prudent advice and wise counsel we were assured that if Mrs Bowie said so, we could stake our reputation on it because she would stake her reputation on what she was passing on to us before she passed it on. What Marguerite Bowie said was what Marguerite Bowie meant.

You could rely on Mrs Bowie for directing and re-focusing a meeting so that it met the desired objectives. For fielding pointed questions and searing criticisms from the Public Accounts Committee, the Performance Review Committee and others, be assured that the Ministry was well represented and — mark you — she was not manufacturing any information — just the *plain truth* in her own inimitable style. With poise, confidence and quiet dignity, she would remain unflinching even in the face of the most searing criticisms. She would bear no grudge against anyone who *bad-mouthed* her. She was more interested in whether they were adding value to the organisation.

Her reprimand was unequivocal yet humane. She did not tamper with one's dignity or self-worth. Her criticisms serve to pull you up — not to bludgeon you. Hers was a confronting not a confrontational leadership posture. She challenged, not bullied you into *doing or behaving better next time*.

I have missed her re-assuring, yet firm voice guiding me in the *Narrow path of professional righteousness*. I have missed her meticulous perusal of my work, not failing to give credit where it was due; I have missed her rational and objective assessment of situations; I have missed her dignified and graceful glides up the stairs in the mornings; I have missed her impeccable memory and her wise counsel, but most importantly, I miss her — full stop. To me, she is an institution from which I have learnt invaluable lessons. We do well to light our candles from this flaming torch.