

17<sup>th</sup> July, 2024

**“REMEMBERING ATTA MILLS – 12 YEARS ON”**

**A LECTURE BY KWESI PRATT, JNR AT THE CEDI HALL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF  
GHANA ON FRIDAY JULY 19, 2024.**

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, Comrades and Friends.

I was pleasantly surprised when I was informed that the Governing Board and the Planning Committee of the J.E.A Mills Memorial Heritage had nominated me to be the keynote speaker at the 12th Anniversary of President John Evans Atta Mills Commemorative Lecture. The first question that popped up in my head was why me? President Atta-Mills had great friends at home and abroad, in all fields of endeavour. Indeed, persons who have distinguished themselves in academia, the practice of law, medicine, cultural expositions, and politics. These people, in my view, could give erudite presentations on the life and times of Prof., an excellent statesman and President of Ghana. In spite of the doubts still lingering in my mind over my suitability for this assignment, I accepted the huge task of delivering this lecture in all humility, knowing fully well that those who took the risk of bestowing this huge honour on me may be willing to forgive my weaknesses. I thank you for this great honour.

The chairperson, please permit me to start this lecture with some gory statistics. The Ghana Trade Report says that Ghana imported food worth GHS 26.7 billion in 2023. These imports included guinea fowls, onions, tomatoes, fish, beef, and grains. Indeed, we imported guinea fowls from Denmark and achieved the inexplicable accolade of being the third-largest importer of tomato paste from Germany. Sometimes, I just wonder, how and why we have become dependent on fish imports when we have managed to create the largest man-made lake in

the world with rivers like the Black and White Volta, Oti, Afram, Asukawkaw, Atakora, Sene, Pru, Daka, Tano, and Pra crisscrossing our land. Ghana is also bordered in the south by the huge Atlantic Ocean and our capacity for the development of aquaculture is huge. As a fact, we import our tomatoes from Burkina Faso and onions from Niger, which are semi-deserts; two countries which have never claimed to be implementing a programme christened, “Planting for Food and Jobs” at a colossal cost of GHS 2.3 billion.

If these figures do not trouble you, please wait a moment and take in the research findings of the Ghana Statistical Service. The 2021 Population and Housing Census reveals that a total of 7,317,555 people representing 24.3 percent of the household population are multi-dimensionally poor. 43.5 percent of these people experienced severe poverty through deprivations in several dimensions simultaneously. We are told that 3,757,628 out of this figure are females and 3,559,927 are male. The Statistical Service also found that more than a third, representing 36.7 percent, of people living in rural areas are multi-dimensionally poor. The Ashanti Region recorded the highest number of persons who are multi-dimensionally poor with 959,031, followed by the Northern Region with 873,742 and the lowest in the Ahafo Region with 135,644. The Savannah Region has the highest proportion of its household population, 49.5 percent, who are multi-dimensionally poor, about 2 times higher than the national average of 24.3 percent.

Dear friends, the rise in prices of all goods and services over the last seven years also tells a horrifying story of national decay. In 2017, the price of a gallon of petrol was GHS 18 but this has risen to GHS 81 in 2024, a percentage increase of 336.84. The price of a ball of kenkey has risen from 50 pesewas to GHS 5.00, representing a percentage increase of 500. A gallon of cooking oil has risen by

230 percent from GHS 50 to GHS 180. A bag of maize which sold at GHS 150 is now selling at between GHS 320 and GHS 350, a rise of 123.33 percent. A bag of gari has risen by 100 percent from GHS 250.00 to GHS 500.00.

A kilo of beef which sold for GHS 18.00 in 2017 now sells at GHS 40.00, representing an increase of 110.53 percent. A tin of milk which sold at GHS 3.00 then, now sells for between GHS 12.00 and GHS 15.00, a percentage increase of 347.50 percent. A loaf of bread which sold at GHS 3.00 to GHS 4.00 is now selling at GHS 10.00 to GHS 20.00, a percentage increase of 127.27. A kilo of red fish which sold at GHS 15.00 to GHS 18.00 is now selling between GHS 35.00 and GHS 40.00, a percentage increase of 127.27. Sachet water has now moved from 20 to 50 pesewas, representing a 150 percent increase. Roasted ripe plantain which sold for GHS 2.00 now sells at between GHS 5.00 to GHS 7.00, an increase of 200 percent. A bag of charcoal selling at GHS 30.00 in 2017 now sells at between GHS 60 and GHS 80.00, an increase of about 133.33 percent.

Ghana's state of decay is also reflected in the extent of devaluation of the cedi. In 2017, the cedi, which exchanged at a rate of GHS 4.35 to the dollar, is now GHS 15.45 to the dollar, representing a percentage increase of 255.17%. The pound sterling, which was exchanged for the cedi at GHS 5.88, is now worth GHS 20.1, an increase of 241.84%. The Euro, which was exchanged for GHS 5.21, is now exchanged for GHS 16.87, representing an increase of 223.8%, while the rate of exchange for the CFA has gone up by 180%.

Statistics made available by the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning showed that Ghana spends 128 percent of her total national revenue on three line items: debt servicing, debt repayment, and public sector emoluments. This is clearly an admission of the fact that the country, Professor Atta-Mills toiled to

salvage from the wreckage of gross mismanagement, has finally attained the status of a bankrupt nation.

The chairperson, why have I taken the trouble to list all these very alarming figures? I have done this in part because I have just been wondering what the Professor Mills I knew would have done in the face of the current challenges facing Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana. I have no doubt that the Professor Mills I know would have done all in his power, even under the most difficult circumstances, to bring about a change in the governance of his beloved country. I was first introduced to Professor Mills by Mr. Zaya Yeebo, who became the first PNDC Secretary for Youth and Sports. He spoke eloquently about the modesty of the professor and his unwavering commitment to the ideals of Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, Founder and First President of the Republic of Ghana. We met on the University of Ghana sports field near the Akuafu Hall.

At that very first meeting, Professor Mills vigorously opposed tribalism as a canker which will undermine efforts at national cohesion vital for the struggle against underdevelopment. He insisted on the need to mobilise all capable Ghanaians who shared in the broad objective of removing all the vestiges of colonialism. He was also against otherwise capable people being prevented from participating in the national development process on account of their party affiliation. He also described in detail how, after the February 1966 CIA-sponsored coup which toppled the progressive government of the Convention People's Party (CPP), his cubicle in the University of Ghana had been raided by the goons and anti-national elements as part of the anti-Nkrumah madness which had engulfed some ill-informed supporters of the regressive elements in our society.

From that day on, I developed a huge respect for Professor Mills as an academic whose heart was in the right place and who could be counted on in the struggle to dismantle the neo-colonial structures which had been erected after 1966 to facilitate the continued enslavement of Ghanaian and African people, and we met from time to time to discuss national and international issues. His unwavering support for national liberation and the construction of a national democratic agenda was never in doubt.

I came to these conclusions without the slightest doubt, that Prof and I came from two different Nkrumaist schools. He was not political in an ideological sense in spite of the fact that he had received training at the Kwame Nkrumah Ideological Institute in Winneba. He was not very comfortable with power and the spotlight it brought, but like the determined competitor and consummate professional he was, he did all he could to serve Ghana well, even at the cost of his health. He was a devoted Ghanaian who was prevented by ill health from making a deeper mark on society. By the time he came to full national prominence, his convictions were largely evangelical Christian and vaguely social-democratic. His vision was moralistic and idealist. He genuinely believed in his Christianity and did good to qualify him to sit at the right-hand side of God in Heaven. He was so unlike some self-proclaimed white gown-wearing Christian politicians today, who spare no opportunity to recite verses of the Bible even as they impose excruciating economic pain on the working people.

Professor John Atta Mills' personal intellect, honesty, decency, humility, work ethic, and determination to serve his country made it possible, even pleasant, to work with him and even to help him in pushing the Ghana Agenda forward in spite of the limitations of social democracy. There can be no doubt that social democracy aims at the reform of capitalism in the mistaken belief that it can be

made more equitable and humane by the introduction of social welfare programs. It binds itself to the promotion of a so-called mixed economy which it hopes will lead to the acceleration of “development”. While socialists aim at smashing capitalism; social democrats commit only to reforming it. However, with Professor Mills as a leader, all of us—Marxists, Social Democrats, Christians, Muslims, anarchists, atheists, and Jews—managed to converge around an effort to move Ghana a step further. This is the kind of leadership our country needs today in the face of the hydra-headed problems confronting us. A leadership which encourages us to rise above our differences to work for decency in our very limited democratic environment. We ought to reject a confused leadership which deepens ethnic, religious, and other differences for its inordinate ego promotion. I submit that it is possible for all Ghanaians to work together for a better Ghana.

I worked as the Public Relations Officer of the Ministry of Youth and Sports after my redeployment from the National Youth Council (NYC). I had become the Secretary of the National Youth Organising Commission under the Chairmanship of Professor Kwesi Botchwey, then a lecturer at the University of Ghana. Many in the PNDC administration then openly protested my membership of this organ on the grounds that I was an enemy of the revolution. A demonstration under the leadership of the late Bartels was organized to put pressure on Zaya Yeebo and other leaders of the revolution to remove me from NYOC, which had taken over the structure of the National Youth Council, for which I had been working since 1976. The pressure was intense and eventually it was decided that I should be posted to the Ministry of Youth and Sports on one third of my salary.

It was in this capacity that I participated in a meeting which discussed the need to sanitise the operations of the National Sports Council. I had served as a

secretary of the Osei-Asibey Committee of Enquiry into the operations of the National Sports Council under the Liman administration and knew about the administrative and other problems of the Council. I was a keen supporter of the idea of a shake-up in sports administration and contributed earnestly to this discussion. I was not surprised when Mr. Yeebo proposed the appointment of Professor Mills as the new chairperson and Chief Executive of the NSC. I was also not surprised when those present at the meeting fully supported the suggestion. They spoke eloquently about his involvement in sports development as a footballer, hockey player, and sports administrator. They also insisted that he was the best choice because of his incorruptibility and fair-mindedness. After this meeting, my boss instructed me to locate Professor Mills and I had what should have been the pleasant duty of breaking the news of him being considered for appointment as the Chairperson and Chief Executive of NSC.

To my utter surprise, Professor Mills was not enthusiastic about the appointment. He was worried about being identified with a coup regime, arguing that soldiers have no business taking over the government machinery without the mandate of the people. He spoke eloquently about the damage which the National Liberation Council (NLC) had done to the national development effort, especially the privatization of state enterprises, the limitation of access to social services such as education and health, the abandonment of the Africa Unity Project, and the regime's support for apartheid South Africa. He believed that the PNDC was radically different from the NLC because it had an anti-imperialist posture but he was still hesitant about its military essence. Somehow, the Professor was persuaded to accept the appointment, which became his very first connection to the PNDC, which led to his assumption of duty as head of the Revenue Agencies and perhaps the Vice Presidential candidate of the NDC and eventually President of the Republic.

Professor Mills contested the 2000 elections as the Presidential candidate of the National Democratic Congress and lost, but even in defeat, he displayed excellent qualities of a leader who cherished the peace of his country and was fully committed to the ethos of democracy. He became one of the few Presidential candidates in Ghana's history to gracefully concede defeat. This he did at a time when tension was mounting, and the newly elected President Kufour and his associates believed that the NDC would not hand over power peacefully. Perhaps the acceptance of the results of the elections by Professor Mills averted a needless conflagration and also demonstrated that it was possible to transfer power peacefully from one administration to another.

Based on what I know, I have come to the conclusion that one of the most difficult years for Professor J. E. A. Mills was 2007. Late that year, I received a very unusual text message from His Excellency, Former President Jerry John Rawlings. The message said simply that Professor Mills would not be able to contest the Presidential election the following year because of ill-health. I was stunned. There had been no indication that the Professor was ill and I made frantic efforts to reach Mr. Rawlings for further details to no avail. I quickly called Mr. Ato Ahwoi with whom we had been working on the Committee for Joint Action (CJA). He was shocked and insisted that I forward the message to him immediately. Mr. Ahwoi called back to say that Prof was as fit as a fiddle. He, however, said that he was in South Africa for a medical checkup and would be back in Accra in a few days.

When Professor Mills returned from South Africa, there was a clamor to see him. Many people wanted to confirm his state of health because a vicious campaign had started in earnest to replace him as the Presidential Candidate of the National Democratic Congress. Many people, including persons who had



nothing presidential about them, had already been contacted and told to hold themselves in readiness to replace the Professor. In a conversation with one of those who were being primed to replace Professor Mills, I asked him to tell me just one good reason why any Ghanaian would want to have him as President. Rather than answer the question, he got angry and asked why somebody like me, who had worked on the Kufour campaign team, could have the audacity to question his eligibility.

I was one of the first people to be admitted into the presence of the Professor, and he did not look like somebody who was about to die. He had lost a bit of weight, and his voice had changed. He sounded like someone who had a severe cold. I asked him directly if he could contest the election and what his state of health was. He smiled broadly and asked, "Do I look like a ghost?" Professor Mills admitted that he had been unwell but insisted that the doctors in South Africa had said he would be alright. I left Prof feeling somehow assured that he was ready for the fight ahead of him and the NDC on December 7, 2008. His confidence was simply overpowering. I was to notice his difficulties later.

Professor Mills visited the Freedom Center to participate in an event and made us all very alarmed at his condition. He was having serious problems with his vision. After the event he walked into my small office and I plucked the courage to ask the very difficult question; Prof can you make it? He asked back; "make what?" I tried to explain myself and he shocked me with his unwavering commitment and sense of duty to the people of Ghana. He said "I will use the last ounce of energy in me to serve the people. I can't give up now. The country is in a very dire situation and I am ready to make any sacrifice to be part of the rescue team".

One of the other difficulties that Professor Mills had was that he ran his elections campaign on a shoe string budget. I recall that when Ghana was strangely called upon to do a third round in the 2008 elections, I had a call from Professor Mills who said in fante “All my money is finished and I don’t know how I am going to get enough funds for Tain.” I quickly consulted some of his closest friends and associates including Mr Ato Ahwoi and we managed to raise enough money for the trip to Tain in less than 24 hours. Prof believed that the electorate was not foolish and could not be bribed to handover their votes. For him the trick was to be honest and transparent with voters in order to secure their mandate.

On assumption of office as President, Professor Mills did something which still baffles many of his associates. Indeed, his very first official assignment was to inaugurate the J.A Plant pool at Dzorwulu in Accra. Before his election, it had been rumored that Mr Joseph Agyapong, the businessman behind the company was a close associate of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and this presented an opportunity for the newly elected President to demonstrate that one’s affiliation or closeness to a political party ought not to be a barrier to participation in business or any other department of the national life. He completely ignored the protests from his own party loyalists to boycott the event.

He also used the occasion to show that his criticism of the opulent lifestyle of public officials was genuine. He arrived for the ceremony in a three car convoy of small cars. This level of modesty was maintained throughout his presidency. He travelled with his ministers in a bus and lived in a small cubicle in the castle. On one occasion, I asked him why he chose to live in that cubicle which will pass for a storeroom in any minister’s house. He told me that he didn’t want to disturb the traffic from the Osu castle to his house at Regimanuel with the

Presidential motorcade. The President left his glorified cubicle on Friday evenings to go home to his beautiful wife and returned on Sunday evening where there was not much traffic.

On his assumption of office, District and Metropolitan Chief Executives appointed by the previous administration were still at post and as was to be expected his party faithful were in a hurry to replace them. They urged the Prof to remove them from office immediately and to replace them with party loyalists. Professor Mills refused and asked the Chief Executives to continue doing their work until such time that he would have finished with the necessary processes for the appointment of new ones. Although this decision appeared to be very unpopular in the NDC, it sent a clear signal to the people of Ghana that we truly had a President who took his oath of office seriously and was a true father for all. Today, there are some people including heavyweights who deliberately create the impression that by wanting to be a “father for all,” Professor Mills condoned corruption and did not pursue criminal elements who had used their positions in the previous administration to amass wealth. This is completely false and most unfair to the memory of Prof. We can still remember the committees of enquiry he set up to investigate alleged wrongdoing and the prosecution of some wrongdoers. The problem was that he was frustrated by the Judiciary and other state institutions at every turn. Perhaps it is useful to warn the incoming Mahama administration that it will not be easy to prosecute wrongdoers in the Nana Akufo-Addo administration. There would be the judiciary to contend with and other factors and institutions which may impede that effort. In any case, what the people of Ghana deserve most is for their new government to work assiduously to improve their access to health, education, employment, housing, nutrition and transportation.

One of the greatest passions of Professor John Evans Atta Mills was for constitutional reform. He so badly wanted the 1992 constitution reviewed and amended and there are many reasons why I agreed with him. First, the constitution, unlike the 1960 constitution, did not commit the Republic of Ghana to Pan-African Unity. It devalued the secular character of the state by its references to deities. It subverted the practice of democracy by making District and Metropolitan Chief Executives and some members of the Assemblies Presidential appointees rather than elected officials. The constitution did not insist that spouses of public officials should declare their assets and Article 71 office holders were treated like queens and kings in the feudalist era.

My problem with this passion was and still is that nowhere in history have the poor been protected against the tyranny of the elite by the mere formulation of words on a piece of paper. As I stated when I appeared before the Professor Mike Oquaye Constitutional Review Committee at the Institute of Economic Affairs, “No constitution enforces itself. Outcomes depend on how people behave around constitutions—especially the governing elites. Often, calls for review and amendment of the constitution are insincere attempts at deflection from misconduct. There is more than enough by way of prescriptions, procedures, and standards of conduct in our constitution for leaders to operate it effectively for the benefit of the people.

“The main reason we have continual constitutional crises lies not so much in poor drafting but in the subservience of our political class to special interests. Unfailingly, since 1992, President after President has overreached and abused his powers. Presidents have turned a blind eye to, or even participated in, appointees’ reckless dissipation of national resources. Presidents have tolerated institutional abuse of citizens' democratic rights. Presidents have supported or

ignored undemocratic claims and use of state power by traditional authorities. Presidents have ignored police and military violence against citizens and Presidents have facilitated militia violence against citizens.” They have also sought on occasions to impose their backward religious beliefs on a secular society. To many, our Supreme Court has also displayed spinelessness in interpreting and applying the Constitution. It has failed to deal with constitutional law as a mechanism through which the powerless can fight the excesses of the bosses in society.

The Chairperson, it is my candid view that any attempt at review and amend the 1992 Constitution ought to focus on:

1. Creating a framework for the formation of a continental union government.
2. The ownership and exploitation of African resources by and for the African people themselves.
3. Implementing provisions which make the working people masters of their own destiny and reject the rule of the parasitic elite.

I had a most revealing encounter with President Mills sometime in 2009. I had been on the Morning Show of Radio Gold, busily criticizing one of his ministers who I thought was completely out of order. As soon as I left the studio, my phone rang, and it was the President. He asked, "Why are you so viciously attacking the minister?" I tried to explain, but he cut me short and insisted that "he is a good man." The President ordered me to stop all I was doing and go to his office. The President was not his usual jovial self. He was very stern. "What has he done to you?" he asked. I was explaining that my criticism was not based on anything personal when Prof walked out into the office of his ADC. I was busy insisting

that the minister's conduct was detrimental to the national interest when the door opened and the minister walked in. Prof looked me in the eye and said, "The minister is here, and now I want you to repeat what you have been saying in his presence." After listening to both of us, Professor Mills pondered for a while and told the minister, "You were wrong, and this is your last chance. If you ever misconduct yourself again, I will dismiss you without any hesitation." That was the true Professor Mills. He did not depend on rumor and petty gossip. He was fair to all but very stern as a leader.

President Mills took over the administration of Ghana at a time when the country was in the woods, but by the time he exited in 2012, Ghana's GDP was growing at 12 percent, the highest in the world. Inflation was at single digit for the longest period under the fourth republic, and serious efforts were being made to alleviate the plight of the working people. The administration was working on the elimination of schools under trees, even in the Greater Accra region. This was the time the government began shaping and implementing policies which give meaning to the constitutional injunction of making education progressively free. There was the supply of free textbooks, a program to provide laptops to teachers and students, free uniforms, and new furniture, The Mills administration upgraded all teacher training institutions into tertiary institutions, and they became Colleges of Education backed by new legislation, the Colleges of Education Act, 2012 (Act 847). The Mills Administration also instituted a policy of establishing universities in regions without Public Universities and established the University for Health and Allied Sciences in the Volta Region, the University for Energy and Natural Resources in the then Brong Ahafo Region. It also started the processes for the establishment of the University for Environment and Sustainable Development which the Mahama Administration continued. His Excellency President John Dramani Mahama and

the Education Minister, Honourable Professor Jane Naana Opoku-Agyemang, took this to another level when they started a program to make sanitary pads available to girls in secondary schools.

We may also have to recognise the shining example of Professor Mills' fight against what has now come to be known as state capture. He led the effort to retrieve state lands handed out to officials of the previous government. This led to repossessing of many lands, including land where the current Foreign Ministry of Ghana is located.

Foreign policy was one of the strong points of Professor Atta-Mills. He fully respected the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states enshrined in both the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) statutes. He did not bow to massive pressure from the West to help France and its allies to intervene in La Cote D'Ivoire to impose Alassane Ouattara as Head of State. His response to a question from a Ghanaian journalist, "di wofie asem," became a popular talking point for a very long time. When the British Prime Minister threatened to punish countries like Ghana for not legalizing homosexuality, he had an earful from President Mills, who made it clear that he would not take dictation from anybody and that Ghana, under his leadership, would choose its own path.

Very early in the Mills administration, I found myself on a three-man team headed for Cuba to explore areas of cooperation. It was led by Captain Kojo Tsikata and Professor Kofi Awonor, Chairman of the Council of State, was a member. At the meeting with the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba, Commandante Rasket Valdes, who was chairing, said Cuba was ready to assist Ghana in any field of her competence and requested that President Mills petition the President of the United States of America to release "The Cuban

Five” from jail. Nobody on the team saw this as an easy task, and Captain Tsikata insisted on handling this complicated task himself. He warned me not to mention the request to the President. Unfortunately for me, Professor Mills asked me to brief him about the trip within 24 hours of our return. I told him about the request from Cuba and gave him all the details I had on “The Cuban Five.” When I finished, he asked me, "So where is the draft?" He was convinced that it was a case of injustice, and he was ready to join the battle for the release of the Cubans who were being held in US prisons. Captain Tsikata was surprised when I told him that the President was ready to sign the petition.

Long before solidarity with Palestine became fashionable, Professor Mills had become a passionate advocate of Palestinian statehood and insisted on the unconditional return of all Palestinian refugees. He supported the right of self-determination of the Saharawi people, arguing that Morocco’s colonial occupation of Western Sahara could not be justified under international law. He personally led Ghana’s delegation to the Non-Aligned summit in Margarita, as a mark of solidarity with the people of Venezuela who were attempting to construct socialism under the leadership of Commandante Chavez. He also supported the right of the Iranian people to maintain their national independence.

At a time when what has been described as the patriotic revolution is sweeping across the Sahel, it is tempting to ask how Professor Mills would have seen the phenomena. I am very sure that he would not have sat in front of Antony Blinken in Washington, like a God-forsaken schoolboy, and asked for assistance to subvert the Burkinabe revolution. He would have endorsed the removal of foreign military bases from the African continent, supported the adoption of a



common currency for West Africa, and encouraged the building of a confederation of West African States.

The Chairperson, in less than five months Ghana will be going to the polls to elect a President and Members of Parliament, and I am going to figure out what Professor Mills would have done if he were the sitting President. I am certain that he would not be traveling around the country threatening that if the people of Ghana fail to elect his favorite driver's mate, he will not hand over power. President Mills would have promised to respect the constitution and to support whoever is chosen by the people. He would not be arrogant enough to think that he knows better than the 34 million people of Ghana whose mandate he exercises.

Comrades and friends, 12 years after the passing of our dear friend and statesman, Professor John Fifi Atta Mills, it is important to ponder over what kind of world we want. Certainly, we want a world without a bomb; a world in which resources which are wasted on the production of killing machines will be spent on agriculture and to protect our environment, a world in which no child goes to bed on an empty stomach, a world free from disease, a world free from racism, a world in which all forms of exploitation and oppression are liquidated. I submit here and now that, that kind of world is not possible under capitalism or its variant masquerading as social democracy. For us in Africa, that new world will be constructed under the broad banner of scientific socialism and the building of the United States of Africa. We must tear down these useless boundaries which were erected by the colonial powers in Germany in 1884.

Victory is certain, and we shall be free.