

Chapter Three

The Relationship between St.Kitts and Nevis 1882 to 1980

Nevis was joined with St. Kitts and Anguilla in 1882 having previously been part of the larger Leeward Islands grouping. The government of the new colony was based in St. Kitts which was its administrative and economic hub with approximately two thirds of the population and a strong sugar industry. Like Anguilla, Nevis was neglected by the central government in St. Kitts under the British and, after adult suffrage, under the elected government. Its infrastructure was inadequate. Charlestown, its capital, became almost a ghost town as soon as businesses closed each day. The sugar industry in Nevis had declined and many of the former sugar estates in Nevis had fallen into ownership of the government. Cotton was grown on some estates. In that regard Nevis was very different from St. Kitts where almost all the arable land was cultivated in sugar cane. Nevisians were proud of their land ownership and, although of limited means, were proud, self-sufficient and independent people.

In 1934 there were over 360 families in Nevis owning or leasing close to 2,000 acres in parcels of up to ten acres. They grew their own fruits and vegetables and raised animals. In St. Kitts at this time there were only 11 such holdings. This created a significant difference between the people of the two islands. The Nevisians were landholders, independent and self-reliant even though not wealthy. Kittitians were still largely dependent on the sugar estates and lived for the most part on the estates or in crowded parts of Basseterre and Sandy Point and in villages built on lands not used for sugar cultivation.

The people of Nevis resented the lack of infrastructure and economic opportunities in Nevis and the concentration of resources in St. Kitts. As happened with Anguilla most of the infrastructure and other development in Nevis came after Nevisians gained effective control

of their own affairs. Unlike Anguilla, Nevis did not secede from St. Kitts. Political events in St. Kitts gave them that control peacefully and very successfully.

By the Constitution and Elections Ordinance 1952, St. Kitts–Nevis–Anguilla was given its first legislature to be elected under adult suffrage. The legislature was known as the Legislative Council. It comprised ten elected members (seven from St. Kitts, two from Nevis and one from Anguilla), two nominated members and the Attorney General. The Legislative Council had power to make laws for the colony limited by the requirement of the assent of the Administrator.

Elected members from Nevis took the cause of Nevisians to the Legislature. Eugene Walwyn, a lawyer from Nevis was one such member of the 1957 Legislative Council. William Kelsick OBE was a nominated member and describes the debate in the Legislative Council on financing for Nevis in these terms:

One of the major economic issues faced at that time, related to the fact that St. Kitts had a wage day but Nevis did not. Every week, the sugar estates in St. Kitts paid wages. However, the economic activity in Nevis was quite different. Their sugar estates had gone out of business therefore, cotton was being planted on a share basis. As a result, cotton farmers had to wait for payment which was made whenever the cotton had been sold, so many lived from one pay day to the next, sometimes under very trying circumstances because this payment would take several months. This was the pattern from as far back as the post emancipation period when the free peasantry planted cotton. Incidentally, during the 1950's, large numbers of Nevisians came to St. Kitts to work on the sugar estates so that they could have regular incomes. All of this explains why requests for subsidies for Nevis was one of the debates (sometimes quite heated) frequently held.

Nevis had a secession movement at the time. That movement showed its political strength in the early 1960s. Action included a demonstration in St. Kitts in support of secession by Nevisians who traveled to St. Kitts by boat for the purpose. Bradshaw temporarily stifled the movement by enticing Eugene Walwyn, one of its main leaders at the time, to join the Labour Party Government as Attorney General. Walwyn lost support in Nevis and was branded a traitor for selling out Nevis at the time of the arrangements for Associated Statehood. Walwyn went on to become a businessman, founding the Bank of Commerce in St. Kitts. He invested the Bank's money in speculative ventures including an airline. The bank went bankrupt in 1985 leaving many Kittitians and Nevisians without their savings. Walwyn was convicted in the High Court of fraud. He was fined \$75,000.

The tragic sinking of the government owned ferry *M.V Christena* on its route from St. Kitts to Nevis on August 1st, 1970 leaving over 230 people (the large majority Nevisians) dead, further clouded relations between St. Kitts and Nevis. The tragedy was made worse because of legal smartness by Eugene Walwyn then Attorney General. None of the families of the victims which lost breadwinners was able to sue the government for the obvious negligence of the captain.

In the aftermath of the disaster, caused by reckless overcrowding of the vessel, the Nevis Reformation Party (NRP) was formed in Nevis. Its main platform was secession from St. Kitts. Among the founders and leaders of that party was Simeon Daniel, a lawyer. While he served as a Civil Servant in St. Kitts for a short while in the mid 1960s, Bradshaw had courted him but failed. After Associated Statehood, Daniel returned to Nevis and immediately got into politics. He became Chair of the Nevis Local Council and then won election to the House of Assembly in 1975 and 1980. Daniel understood and captured the spirit of Nevisians by whom he was greatly loved. He was humble and sociable and spoke in

soft tones. He had a brilliant mind and was fearless. He was belatedly and posthumously made a National Hero.

The following exchange of letters graphically portrays the divisions between St. Kitts and Nevis in 1975.

On December 13, 1975 the Premier Bradshaw wrote to Simeon Daniel, Leader of the Opposition and Chairman of the N.R.P referring to the results of the 1975 General Election held on December 1, 1975.

In the circumstances, I am firstly to welcome you, personally, to the ranks of membership of the House of Assembly, and secondly to invite your Party which gained complete control of the Nevis Local Council on 1st instant to join with my Government to give full effect to the expressed wishes of the electorate; to take part in the urgent development of the State, as well as to re-unite our people and to heal whatever wounds the elections may have caused

Mr. Daniel replied on January 17, 1976 in a ten page letter including the following paragraphs –

You have invited my party which gained complete control of the Nevis Local Council on December 8, 1975 to join with your Government to give full effect to the expressed wishes of the electorate. In the circumstances to give full effect to the expressed wishes of the electorate of Nevis would require frank recognition by you and your Government of the desire of the voters of Nevis to achieve Political Separation from the existing State of St. Kitts-Nevis-Anguilla as indicated by the recent overwhelming vote for candidates who campaigned on Secession. The people of Nevis are “united” in their resolve and no reunification is necessary for them; as to healing “whatever wounds the election may have caused” the injuries from which the Nevis People feel themselves to be suffering have antedated the recent elections by over two decades.

In conclusion, frankness requires that you be told the facts which your sycophants will never share with you:

a) It is the general feeling among Nevisians that your attitude towards them and the island is one of calculated malevolence.

b) By ignoring the anxious need of the people for proper roadways, adequate water supply, land use and development during your recurring administration you have demonstrated your complete disregard for and lack of interest in our island and its people; they have never forgotten and cannot forgive your well-kept promise of 1957 that they should have 'Bones in their rice and Pepper in their soup'

c) The fictional character which your actions have ascribed to the Nevis Local Council since Statehood; your refusal to extend active constitutional recognition to it, or to include it in the administration of the affairs of Government regard and would continue to regard Nevis as a colonial appendage to St. Kitts a status which the people of Nevis would never continue to accept.

In the latter half of the 1970s, as NRP gained strength, Nevisians began to agitate very strongly for secession for Nevis. A referendum was organised unofficially in Nevis in 1977 and resulted in 99 per cent of the votes cast in favour of secession.

Bradshaw died in 1978 and Southwell in 1979 leaving the Labour Party under the leadership of Lee Moore. Moore was a brilliant advocate and a man of integrity but not a great politician. His short temper in the face of political rhetoric did not help. He refused to call a meeting of the House of Assembly after Kennedy Simmonds won, in a by-election, the Central Basseterre seat which Bradshaw had held up to his death. It took a court case for that election to be finally determined. The returning officer rejected 99 ballots and declared the Labour Party candidate Anthony Ribeiro duly elected. Simmonds took the matter to the High

Court. The Judge counted the ballots himself and declared Simmonds the winner by 22 votes. The Court of Appeal upheld the Judge's decision on August 10, 1979.

Rather than calling a meeting of the National Assembly and allowing Simmonds to be sworn in, Moore decided to call a general election. That election was held on February 18, 1980. There were seven seats in St. Kitts and two in Nevis. Moore's Labour Party won four seats in St. Kitts and PAM, led by Simmonds, won three. NRP won the two seats in Nevis. PAM joined with NRP to form the government with a 5-4 majority. Simmonds was made Premier and Daniel Minister of Finance. With his party holding the balance of power and in control of the key Ministry, Daniel temporarily shelved his secessionist agenda and focused his attention on redressing the wrongs done to Nevis in the past. His colleague Ivor Stevens, the other elected representative of NRP, joined Daniel in the Simmonds led Government as Minister of Communications and Works, another key Ministry from which to redress the imbalance from which Nevis had suffered. The resistance had been hugely successful.