

Chapter One

West Indies Federation

Before I focus on the period of self-rule I note some significant prior historical landmarks. The first was the end in 1838 of slavery, the most horrendous crime against humanity ever perpetrated. Another was the decision of the British in 1882 to lump Nevis and Anguilla with St. Kitts against the wishes of their people. The country is still more than 140 years later feeling the negative impacts of that decision.

One hundred years after the abolition of slavery working and living conditions for the masses of the people were still outrageously bad. In the mid 1930s the laborers on the sugar estates decided they had had enough and actively resisted their exploitation. The Buckleys uprising in 1935 was a significant landmark in that struggle. The murderous cruelty of the colonialists in the face of the uprising reverberated throughout the Caribbean and helped to embolden the working classes and the labor movement. The labor movement in various forms culminating in the St. Kitts and Nevis Trades and Labour Union and the associated Labour Party, became the catalyst for the march towards workers rights and towards political self-rule here.

With Britain severely weakened by the impact of the Second World War the movement for independence by the British colonies gained momentum. In the three years after the war India, Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon became independent. In the 1950s the British prepared to give independence to its Caribbean colonies. A two-step approach was decided – a political union of territories followed by a single state with full independence. Britain offered this status to all its territories in the Caribbean. Ten territories accepted namely Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Montserrat, the then St Kitts-Nevis-Anguilla, Saint Lucia, St Vincent and Trinidad and Tobago. The Federation

was established by the British Caribbean Federation Act of 1956. It took effect on January 3, 1958.

The territories which refused to join the Federation were Bahamas, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, British Honduras (now Belize) and British Guiana (now Guyana). The Cayman Islands and Turks and Caicos Islands were at the time dependencies of Jamaica.

The Federal government was headed by an Executive Governor-General, appointed by Britain and included:

- a Prime Minister, elected from among and by the members of the House of Representatives
- a Cabinet comprising the Prime Minister and ten other elected Members chosen by him
- a Council of State presided over by the Governor General. The Council included the Prime Minister and Members of the Cabinet as well as three senators and three civil servants. The senators and civil servants were chosen by the Governor General. The Council of State was the principal decision making body at the start of the Federation. In 1960 Britain agreed to abolish this Council and allow the Cabinet to take over the powers of the Council.
- a forty-five member House of Representatives, with Members elected from among the Territories; and
- a nineteen-member Senate, nominated by the Governor General following consultation with the Prime Minister.

The Governor General was Lord Hailes of Britain and the Prime Minister was Sir Grantley Adams (Premier of Barbados). The Federal capital was located in Trinidad and Tobago.

During its brief existence (1958-62), a number of fundamental issues were debated with a view to strengthening the Federation. Among these were direct taxation by the Federal Government, central planning for development, establishment of a Regional Customs Union and reform of the Federal Constitution. The issue of direct taxation was particularly controversial. The constitution prohibited the Federation from imposing income tax for at least the first five years of its life. Added to this were the greatly differing positions among the Territories with respect to how other federal taxes should be levied.

In addition, the Federation began quickly to seek to establish federal institutions and supporting structures. It created a federal civil service. It established the West Indies Shipping Service (in 1962) to operate two multipurpose ships – the Federal Maple and the Federal Palm – donated to it by the Government of Canada. It had embarked also on negotiations to acquire the subsidiary of the British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC), namely British West Indies Airways (BWIA).

Cooperation in tertiary education was consolidated and expanded during this period. The then University College of the West Indies (UCWI), which was established in 1948 with one campus at Mona, Jamaica, opened its second campus at St Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, in 1960.

Popular support for the Federation in some of the territories was not strong. Insularity raised its ugly head from the outset and divisions arose between politicians in the union and between powerful politicians who did not participate in the Federal Government. The problems included dissatisfaction with the governance and administrative structures imposed by the British; disagreements among the territories over policies, particularly with respect to taxation and central planning; an unwillingness on the part of most Territorial Governments to give up power to the Federal Government; and the location of the Federal Capital. Jamaica was the largest but weakest link. Its distance from the Eastern Caribbean exacerbated the

insular suspicions. Jamaicans felt they were not adequately represented in the Federal bodies, that the other islands would drain the island's growing wealth from bauxite and that the capital should have been located in Jamaica. It is ironic that 66 years later the smaller islands all have higher GDPs per capita than Jamaica.

The decisive development, which led to the demise of the Federation was the withdrawal of Jamaica as decided by its electorate in a national referendum in 1961. The vote was 54 per cent in favour of withdrawal. Trinidad and Tobago followed suit after the famous statement of Dr Eric Williams, the then Premier of Trinidad and Tobago, that one from ten leaves nought. The Federation collapsed in January 1962.

It is of significance to St. Kitts that Robert Bradshaw held the important Cabinet post of Minister of Finance of the Federation and moved to the Capital in Trinidad. It is also significant that the smaller Leeward and Windward Islands favored the federal arrangement and sought after the collapse of the West Indies Federation to join with Barbados in what was called The Little Eight.

Barbados declined and made its own way to independence in 1966. That led to the Leewards and Windwards Islands also going it alone in the two-step process of Associated Statehood followed by independence.