

... AND THEN THERE WERE ONLY THIRTEEN

by Trevor W. Hearl

“Friends” of St Helena, no less than St Helenians themselves, may be forgiven for focusing their interests and efforts loyally on that distant isle with rarely a thought about the “family” to which it belongs. But having hauled down the flag in Hong Kong, the spotlight is now focused on the fate of the 180,000 people in the 13 other British Overseas Dependencies (counting St Helena’s three communities [with Ascension and Tristan da Cunha] as a single unit). And so, within six weeks of taking office, “New” Labour’s Under Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean, faced a House of Lords’ debate on their future. The criterion of “membership”, she explained, was simply the wish to remain “dependent”. She added, “We should be proud that (they) continue to place their trust (in the United Kingdom) for their well-being, defence and security”, and she promised to give their “reasonable needs” top priority. But how do politicians see St Helena’s concerns compared with those of other Dependencies? Let us take a sample of those aired in the debate on June 11, 1997.

Montserrat’s “appalling problems” - volcanic lava over-whelming settlements, destroying farmlands and making normal life impossible, dramatically described by Lady Hamwee - were soon putting the new Government’s commitment to the test. Within a fortnight the Minister was on the 40-square mile island to see for herself, approving £6 million in emergency aid, while recognizing that the dread threat of evacuation might have to be faced, as at Tristan 36 years ago. But Montserrat’s population is 12,000, not 300.

DEVELOPMENT HAS A DOWNSIDE

Natural disasters on this scale are fortunately rare, though the other Caribbean Dependencies - Anguilla, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands and the Turks and Caicos Islands - live under the seasonal hazard of hurricanes, destroying homes and harvests at a stroke. Yet they flourish, servicing tourism and offshore finance facilities (the Caymans are now the fifth largest banking centre in the world) which in turn stimulates local production and business enterprise. But development brings man-made disasters, notably oil-spillage, and drug-trafficking with associated crime and money-laundering. Living under the shadow of major drug trans-shipment routes between South and North America imposes crushing social costs on small island communities; it is no fun playing “pig-in-the-middle” with the drug barons!

The Falklands and Gibraltar suffer from covetous neighbours, with war and occupation the fate of the former, and constant harassment that of the latter. As Argentina still lays claim to the Falklands, this small community of 2,200 must bear the social burden of a large garrison, with support services, costing the United

Kingdom over £70 million a year. Incredibly the islands expect to meet this expense themselves if the buoyant economy gains oil revenues. Gibraltar, too, is more than paying its way despite Spain's stranglehold of its frontier and the closure of its dockyard causing 20 percent unemployment, notably among thousands of Moroccan immigrants. Tourism and financial services offer a future, but not for ex-dockyard workers. Gibraltarians feel let down by Britain against Spain and want "Channel Islands status" to spike Spain's guns. Other problems include oil spillage, drug trafficking, and having to keep European Union (EU) standards! How, for example, do you provide EU quality water for 30,000 users from three square miles of The Rock?

Vast expanses of isolated land and sea, virtually uninhabited, might be thought to bring other worries to Whitehall and Westminster. Yet apparently the British Antarctic Territory and South Georgia, where scientists alone hold the fort, and the British Indian Ocean Territory, whose population was relocated to form a U.S. naval and air base at Diego Garcia, seem to give pleasure and profit. Management by Commissioner precludes many problems and ensures peace of mind in London. However, tiny Pitcairn's 45 inhabitants are straggling on a subsistence economy at their 10 square mile Pacific outpost, and the Island Council, unhappy at finding itself in "the red" by £165,000 in 1995, want an airstrip to attract tourists.

TO DEPEND OR NOT TO DEPEND?

Conversely the most populous and prosperous Dependency is Bermuda, British since 1609 where 60,000 souls live on a 21 square mile cluster of causeway-linked islands isolated 700 miles off the U.S. coast So is this luxury resort the ideal trouble-free dependency? Not quite. A few years ago Britain sent troops to quell racial riots, while the more recent closure of the naval base led to a "destabilizing" campaign for independence, many black Bermudians resenting Britain's refusal to recognize them or the Bermuda Regiment as British. The last Governor to face these troubles, Lord Waddington, told the House of a feeling in the Dependencies that Britain wanted to be "shot of them" for "attracting unwelcome attention from the U.N. Decolonization Committee". Yet in 1995 Bermudians still voted 73.7 percent to 25.6 percent against independence. The National Audit Office in fact recognized Bermuda "as a well-managed Territory" from which the others could learn a few lessons in financial affairs!

What then did the debate reveal about Parliament's cares and concerns for St Helena in the context of its kindred dependencies? Its most outstanding problem was that, alone among the 13, it has been subsidized by Britain for over 330 years, yet still has the lowest income-level per head (\$3,500). Currently it absorbs £8.6 million development aid, £1.1 million shipping subsidy and £3.6 million budgetary aid annually, the highest per capita grant in the British aid program. Had the funds financed production (tourism, coffee, seeds and banking were quoted) its present unemployment crisis with 400 workless might have been averted, whereas now Saints are ever more resentful at their loss of historic rights to live and work in the United Kingdom. Sadly, this culture of dependence is compounded by a "long his-

tory of government initiatives coming to nothing". Whitehall is also worried by the island's long-term pension liability (£11.67 million) and lack of insurance against foreseeable risks - rockfalls, fuel fires, road accidents, professional negligence or even against the landing hazards of ships' passengers.

St Helena may not be overrun with lava or its beaches by oil slicks, or its community threatened by drug barons or its economy by money-launderers; neither do its people face typhoons or snow-blizzards, or fear evacuation, yet its plight received more attention from their Lordships than that of any other Dependency. Seen from London, its problems seem so eminently soluble; Baroness Hooper, who instigated the debate, had no doubts what was needed:

"St Helena desperately needs a new airport and landing facilities. When considering this particular request [...] one should not forget that (before the coming of civil aviation) the Cayman Islands were described as the islands that time forgot[...]. Today, in addition to population growth, the Cayman Islands have about 1.5 million tourists each year". (Hansard 11 June 1997 col. 895)

"Let us start now", urged Lord Beaumont, praising the work of the previous Minister, Lady Chalker, who, "in particular with St Helena, showed great imagination and sympathy and tried as hard as she could". Now, "British citizenship would go a long way towards solving many of the problems". The Earl of Iveagh agreed, devoting his maiden speech to the island: "The UK has let down St Helena[...]. The burning issue for the islanders[...] is their lack of representation in Parliament". And he pleaded "that this Administration help the St Helena islanders to help themselves". Lord Holderness, a former Minister of Overseas Development, saw few merits in an airport, but found island agriculture, fishing and tourism "more promising than expected", while he would get "enormous pleasure" from their return to British citizenship. Further support came from Baroness Young and Lords Bethel, Beloff, St John of Bletso, and Waddington. Of the 15 speakers, nine spoke up for the Saints, but significantly, no concerns were aired on behalf of either Tristan da Cunha or Ascension Island.

ST HELENA POLICY PLAN

Baroness Symons' reply demonstrated how closely the new Government's policies follow the old. She agreed that "St Helena's isolation and limited resources oblige special consideration" to help this "beautiful and unique island [...]develop a viable and self-sustaining economy". Under its Country Policy Plan she confirmed a £28 million, three-year grant, an extended UK training and work-experience scheme, a "major wharf improvement project" and talks about opening Ascension Island to commercial traffic "that might allow an air link to St Helena to become a commercially viable proposition". Recently a Foreign Office Business Forum to promote investment in St Helena received an "encouraging" response.

Whatever help others were getting for their catastrophes and concerns, the Minister had certainly met most requests made on St Helena's behalf. But not all. "A number of noble Lords raised the question of UK and EU citizenship. I should be clear on this point. Her Majesty's Government have no plans at present to grant

British citizenship to remaining dependent territories after Hong Kong returns to Chinese sovereignty”.

At a stroke the received wisdom of the last few years was swept away. Her reasoning was logical enough: small islands could not offer reciprocal action; the cases of Gibraltar and the Falklands were not comparable; the “French system” of integrated territories was constitutionally incompatible; and there were “still 3.5 million British nationals in Hong Kong who would argue that any such change should include them”.

Thus, despite all the good will and good works, “the St Helena Question” (as the United Nations de-Colonisation Committee’s annual slanging match against the UK is called) is still pursued in the corridors of power with an air of unreality. Who could believe that, for three months prior to this debate, the British broadsheet press had run an unprecedented St Helena campaign, claiming governmental negligence, tyranny, economic neglect and dishonourable evasion of responsibility, quoting former colonial officials, Ministers and even Governors? UK development aid may have raised the Saints’ standard of living to levels not dreamed of a generation ago but, apart from raising expectations, it counts for little politically when the peoples’ heartfelt concerns are treated with nods and winks - “just wait ‘til after Hong Kong”. Well, now we know: island demands for British citizenship and more financial aid will cut no ice in London.

But St Helenians have a right to expect - in addition to efficient management of their affairs - the replacement of fatuous rhetoric by an open and honest dialogue of what can and cannot be done. The scouts of the St Helena Citizenship Commission are already reconnoitring for the next campaign. Politicians of all parties agree that issues of citizenship, and the island’s inscrutable “divide-’n-rule” Constitution, are ethical and moral matters. So if “human rights”, “democracy” and “freedom of the press” mean anything under the Government’s cardinal foreign policy criterion in dealing with countries outside Britain’s jurisdiction, St Helenians have a right to expect the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary to ensure that these rights also apply in “the little state of St Helena” for which he has every responsibility.

SOURCES

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- St Helena: House of Commons, Hansard, 22 January 1997 cols. 893-912.
- Contingent Liabilities in the Dependent Territories: National Audit Office, The Stationery Office, 30 May 1997.

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