

# CRISIS IN PARADISE - ST HELENA UNREST

by Trevor W. Hearl

“A Night of Fires: Police suspect arson” ran the St Helena News main headline on April 4, 1997, confirming the bush telegraph from Longwood on April Fool’s night. But it was no joke. A police transit van and a Solomon’s Company bus were in ashes along with the gates and notice-board of Longwood police post. Attempts to fire an Agricultural Department Land Rover and the World Weather Watch station at Bottom Woods had caused only minor damage. A man was arrested and remanded in Jamestown’s historic jail. Unimpressed with Judge Tumim’s recent praise for his new lodgings, he wanted out, lured the lone jailer into his cell, locked him in and walked off, reputedly to hide in the absent French Consul’s grounds at Longwood for a few days. But by then he had also unwittingly fired the imagination of Britain’s broadsheet press.

The news broke in London on April 15. “Far-flung British island revolts: Dependency racked by riot as its governor sails into sunset”, splashed The Guardian. Rumours of riot had the press gunning for St Helena, but pinning them down was not so easy. Reuters no longer had a correspondent manning that outpost and few reporters had a handy St Helena Telephone Directory. The Foreign Office proved tartly evasive; the governor, out on the high seas, denied everything; and the island government seemed loathe to explain what was going on. With memories of how the Falklands War blew up, and with a UK general election looming, journalists suspected they must be on to something. Falklands veteran Max Hastings, now editor of the *Evening Standard*, even ran a tasteless two-page spoof the next day, “All we need now is a nice little war [..]”.

## CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS

Meanwhile, someone -- probably Angela Wigglesworth, just back from St Helena for the *Financial Times* — got through to an islander, the Hon. Eric W. George, MBE, JP, MLC, to ask about the riots. “What riots?” he asked. “Haven’t you got a crisis?” she asked. “You, bet”, he replied, “a constitutional crisis”. And in the next 24 hours he was interviewed on eight BBC radio programs and phoned by every diplomatic editor in London. For ten days, St Helena attracted almost as much publicity as when a French emperor once retired there.

Eric’s story was briefly this. He and another Executive Councillor, Bill Drabble, had resigned “because of the governor’s dictatorial attitude”, forcing a rare meeting of the Legislative Council, at which a motion of no confidence in the governor was ruled out of order, but one to request a dissolution and general election was passed. Governor Smallman was due for leave in the United Kingdom and at the last minute, boarding the RMS *St Helena* for home, he agreed to dissolve Council on his return and hold a general election on July 9. Councillors were now planning

a campaign against British government budget cuts and for the restoration of their historic rights as British citizens. Councillor Bobby Robertson has written to the Queen and “Saints” have raised thousands of hard-earned pounds to take the British government to court.

Now this was fighting talk! “Where the Saints go marching in” was music to the ears of editors desperate for new angles on the U.K.’s own election campaign. David and Goliath always made a good story, all the better for Goliath being the Foreign Office whose supercilious spokeswoman had infuriated reporters. She made them realize what tiny, faraway St Helena was up against *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Independent*, *The Guardian* and *Observer* backed the “Saints” all the way, as indeed did many local papers around the country. Stories, leaders, letters and cartoons gave press support and publicity worth millions of pounds: “Economic ills spark revolt”, “Whitehall spending cuts blamed for unrest.”. “St Helena fumes over dictatorial style of governor”, “London stifling St Helena economy”, “St Helena tyranny, plea to Queen”, “Act violated St Helenian’s rights”, “No honour left in what’s left of Empire”.

### **“ST HELENA: MADE IN BRITAIN”**

Editorial leaders were equally forthright, especially over citizenship. “Work for St Helena: One way for Britain to right an ex-imperial wrong” declared *The Times* on April 16; “Open the door to St Helena” demanded the *Daily Telegraph* the next day; “Island in the shade: Britain must pay its colonial debt” argued *The Guardian* on the 19th. Indeed the press had thrown St Helena a lifeline a few weeks previously. “An island cut adrift: St Helena’s inhabitants feel abandoned by the UK”, had been the *Financial Times*’ introduction to the topic on March 8, while *The Times* featured ODA’s St Helena Business Forum on April 1: “St Helena seeks investors as British aid dwindles”.

Riding on the crest of a wave, with editors daily demanding new copy, *The Times* was reduced to running a story that the island had run out of fax paper -- a shrinking Executive Council broke the St Helena Government’s silence on April 17. Would they reveal exciting plans to use ODA’s latest £26 million package, to encourage investors to provide new services, to find work for the unemployed, giving Jamestown an uplift, to welcome people who will restore the island’s decaying country homes, or in any way exploit present opportunities to get St Helena out of the doldrums? Well, not quite. They deplored the media’s mistakes and wished to stress five points: there were no riots, no political fire-raising, no gubernatorial flight from crisis, but a welcome general election and a constitutionally correct governor rejecting the Legislative Council’s nominees for executive power. So, what can one say, expect, who were THEY campaigning for?

### **GETTING “ROMANTIC ST HELENA” OUT OF THE DOLDRUMS**

[...] a romantic and beguiling place, claimed Mark Wolfson (Con. Sevenoaks) opening a debate on St Helena in the House of Commons on January 22 following a visit by a team from the Dependency’s All-Party Group in August 1996. “It does

not disappoint”. Sadly that cannot be said of politics responsible for its economic plight. Simmering discontent among its local people, the resignation of two Executive Councillors and a general election on July 9, reflect resentment at “dictatorial” local government, loss of British citizenship and a rising tide of unemployment. Yet politicians in London and Jamestown who know the problems seem loathe to tackle them. All agree on some “key issues” -- the four “C’s” (Citizenship, Communication, Commitment and the Constitution) -- though I would add a fifth, Cooperation, without which the others would solve little. So what did they say at Westminster?

### **FRIENDS AT WESTMINSTER?**

Their first priority was to allow more islanders into Britain to work. “I am not the only Hon. Member”, admitted Sir David Mitchell (Cons. NW Hants), “who did not realize when we passed the British Nationality Act 1981 that we were closing off the route for St Helenians to come to work in the UK”. From the Opposition, Dr Marek (Lab. Wrexham) and Sir Russell Johnston (Lib. Dem. Inverness) concurred. Without UK earnings, experience and training, no economic policy for St Helena could be effective. But Sir David went further: “In the interests of justice and economics, Parliament should again address the issue of citizenship”. Added Dr Marek, “The matter will not go away. A settlement must be reached as soon as possible”, which, Sir Russell noted, should not have to wait “until Hong Kong is sorted out”.

On communications, warm tributes were paid to the RMS *St Helena* and its management, but the merits of an airfield were viewed with reserve. Airport maintenance was seen by Mr. Wolfson as a problem best avoided, but Dr Marek thought as it would be “reasonably easy” to build. A weekly flight from an “African coastal town” was worth considering. A UK-Ascension Island airlink seemed more practical. “Ascension needs to be brought into the tourism and commercial picture with St Helena”, urged Mr. Wolfson, not the least for fishing vessels. Yet no one asked why the 40-year-old Bahamas Treaty with the United States, restricting the island and its American airfield to military use, has not been amended to bring St Helena within four days commercial travel of UK.

Britain’s commitment to St Helena, on historical, legal and moral grounds, was endorsed on all sides, though Hugh Bayley (Lab. York) wondered whether ODA funds would not be better spent on “much poorer countries in the Third World”. By commitment, MPs meant raising “St Helena’s ability better to stand on its own feet”, though their plans for tourism, import substitution and privatizing services ignored the disabling realities they admitted to exist -- that island law discouraged investment, offered no financial services and “empathy” between officials and islanders was at an all-time low.

Councillors should have greater authority though constitutional reform, claimed MPs, dismayed to find policies made in Whitehall and injustices referred to Westminster. “What is going on?” asked Dr Marek, reciting a litany of misgovernment masked by Ministerial cover-up. Sir Russell Johnston alone favoured “the French

system” linking dependencies to the homeland with “access to European Union funding”, but all other speakers wanted “Saints” to find their own solutions through “self-help”, without apparently realizing that Councillors held widely differing views on the matter.

### **£26 MILLION BOOST FOR SELF-HELP**

The then-Minister, Sir Nicholas Bonsor, admitted that the problems had been known “for some time”, but “the need for positive and real change” was now being addressed “vigorously”. He summarized the position: grants of £8 million a year, “the highest per capita package of UK aid in the world”, a three-year plan (£26 million) to aid private sector development and public sector reform; more responsibility for the St Helena government; wharf improvement and a fishing company creating 40 new jobs. But problems remained: change brought “short-term hardship and discontent”, isolation deterred investment, an airport would entail “enormous expense”, unemployment had reached 450. “But this is not insuperable so long as we and the St Helena government work together”. He pinned hopes on a business forum in London providing new investment, ending enigmatically: “We cannot yet resolve the difficulty of regulating an Internet lottery, but we hope to do so in the future”.

So has the measure of St Helena’s economic salvation now been taken? In theory, to find 450 jobs would achieve the unique distinction of “zero unemployment”. Already, paradoxically, economic indicators point to prosperity. In vehicle ownership, house building, consumer durables, leisure pursuits, alcohol/tobacco consumption, public utilities (water, electricity, telecommunications) and social welfare (educational and medical provisions), St Helena scores highly in any global league table. Even problems of ill-health are those of affluence. In trading licenses per head of population it must be a world-beater with a private sector “saturated with small service industries”. The United Nations rates it in the “upper middle class” group; ODA claims that “social indicators more than match this”. So where is the catch?

Catches, sadly, are legion; everyone has a favourite. Isolation is commonly seen as the root problem. Others take a cue from Mr. Micawber: “Income £145,000, expenditure £4,692,000 = Misery”, with reliance on aid and remittances having lured the economy into that dreaded downward spiral we used to call pauperism. The Agricultural Officer in 1994 dubbed it “a socialist paradise”, though ODA advisers with experience of Eastern Europe found it more resistant to reform. “Government” remains the dominant “industry”, employer, landowner and even shopkeeper; it controls the media and councillors have called it a “tyranny”. Writers on Britain’s dependent territories all shake their heads on reaching St Helena. Yet MPs mapped out a path to prosperity, so let us briefly trace the recent fortunes of a prime example.

**SO MUCH TO DO ...**

Tourism, “low volume, high quality”, has long been agreed to be St Helena’s best hope of economic salvation. It would help fund the RMS St Helena, promote island horticulture and handicrafts, encourage conservation of buildings and habitat, and support local services such as information, museum, transport, accommodation and shops. The main beneficiaries, of course, would be islanders, not least by creating island-based employment, whereas work overseas, despite its advantages, means “orphans”, social problems and skilled labour shortages at home. No wonder the case for tourism has been argued in every generation in living memory. So what has been done?

### **... SO LITTLE DONE**

The short answer is very little, if the findings of Rendel’s 1993 Tourism Study are taken seriously. But the St Helena Government did not take it seriously; they ignored it. Two years later, in January 1995, the Overseas Development Administration, expecting to fund a five-year £10 million tourism pump-priming project, asked for a reply. “Given the importance of the subject”, ODA recommended that the St Helena government appoint a Director of Tourism and produce a strategy, subsequently the Tourism Policy Statement of February 1996, for which the St Helena government’s quid pro quo was yet another Tourism Master Plan, funded by a U.N. Development Program -- “paralysis by analysis” sighed a Whitehall mandarin. But Westminster MPs deplore such goading of a dependency’s government (“the umpire umpiring the umpire” as Mark Wolfson put it, stiffening their demand for constitutional reform). But reform of what, to the satisfaction of whom?

The charade is played out in London that Jamestown takes the policy initiatives on tourism or any other project, at councillors’ behest in the interest of constituents, with dedicated civil servants in The Castle doing their democratic bidding. Yet everyone knows that the Chief Secretary evolves policy, agreed with Whitehall, before it is pressed confidentially through Executive Council, leaving Legislative Councillors in the dark. They are elected - in the absence of political parties - on personality, not policy and campaign for more, not less, UK aid, with greater control over its use to clip the wings of ODA experts. The Minister claims that difficulties will be overcome if “we work together”, but how can the parody of Whitehall/Westminster imposed on this tiny island community -- a system fomenting confrontation -- foster cooperation? Sympathetic business management is the economy’s only long-term hope. Meanwhile, like a patient awaiting a blood transfusion, island tourism awaits inward investment.

St Helena can hardly claim to offer investors blue-chip opportunities. Nevertheless, the late Minister’s “Business Forum” in March mustered a dozen selected representatives of banking, fishing and tourism to meet half a dozen Ministry specialists in London. May they be treated more courteously by the St Helena government than previous entrepreneurs! Most were kept at bay by unwarranted arrogance and a hostile legal minefield leaving them to assume a “hidden agenda” in St Helena affairs. This will persist until the Saints have a right of abode in the United

Kingdom, assert two former ODA advisers in *The Times* of April 23, implying that island officials and councillors undermine their fragile economy for spite. Should it be true that legal barriers to immigration and inward investment are island inspired, it would be economic suicide to strengthen local government, tourism would wither, property would continue to decay, and classic effects of isolation, even a shrinking gene-pool, would result. But the latest writer on St Helena, Harry Ritchie, found local councillors politically impotent, subservient to a governor of “virtually unlimited power” who struggled “against the ignorance and indifference of the Foreign Office”. (*The Last Pink Bits* [1997, p.228]). Certainly Whitehall has the last word on all island legislation, passing or disallowing it, according to British government policy. So back to Whitehall and, after Mayday’s Labour landslide, a new Foreign Secretary.

### **“NO EASY ANSWER”**

Miracles are not to be expected, however. Indeed, the “Liberal landslides” of schoolboy history in 1832, 1868 and 1906 each contributed to St Helena’s economic ruin. Dare we believe that history will not be repeated in 1997? “There is no easy answer that I can offer on behalf of a future Labour Government”, was the cautious message in January of the party spokesman, Tony Lloyd, now a Minister at the Foreign Office. As no serious research has ever been done into St Helena’s social and economic history, or how its people might be better motivated to resolve their problems, the chances of any UK government finding a panacea must remain slim.

Now is the time for a new start, nevertheless. A new government in London can set the tone by righting a wrong, as the press and MPs advise, by admitting that St Helenians are British. Meanwhile, in Jamestown the newly elected Council after July 9 will have their opportunity to press for legal reforms and put the unemployed back to work, making the island ship-shape for the 21st Century - and their own Quincentenary. St Helena need no longer linger in the doldrums. Facing the future, there’s all to play for!

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