

GETTING “ROMANTIC ST HELENA” OUT OF THE DOLDRUMS

by Trevor W. Hearl

“[...] a romantic and beguiling place”, claimed Mark Wolfson opening a debate on St Helena in the House of Commons on 22nd January 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 policies responsible for its economic plight. Simmering discontent among its loyal people, the resignation of two Executive Councillors and a General Election on 9th July, 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 ‘Cs’ - Citizenship, Communication, Commitment and the Constitution - though I would add a fifth, Co-operation, 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, “who did not realise 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 and Sir Russell Johnston 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”. “The matter will not go away”, agreed Dr Marek. “A settlement must be reached’ as soon as possible”, which Sir Russell declared, 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” worth considering. A UK-Ascension Island airlink seems more practical. “Ascension needs to be brought into the tourism and commercial picture with St Helena”, urged Mr Wolfson, not 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, had 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 wondered whether O.D.A. 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 privatising services, ig-

nored 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 through 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 realising 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 summarised the position: grants of £8 million a year, “the highest per capita package of UK. aid in the world”; a 3-year plan (£26m) to aid private sector development and public sector reform; more responsibility for the St Helena Government; wharf improvement and a fishing company making 40 new jobs. 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 provision), St Helena scores highly in any global league table. Even problems of ill-health are those of affluence. In trading licences per head of population it must be a world-beater with a private sector “saturated with small service industries”. The UN rates it in the “upper-middle income” 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, £4,693,000 + Misery”, with reliance on aid and remittances having lured the economy into that dread 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 find 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”. Writer 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 5-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 UN Development Programme - “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 co-operation? 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 entrepre-

neurs! 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 'Saints' have a right of abode in the UK., assert two former ODA advisers in *The Times* (23rd April), 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) page 228). Certainly Whitehall has the last word on all Island legislation, passing it or "disallowing" it, according to British Government policy. So back to Whitehall and, after May day'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 the 9th July 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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