

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

FJM-11

St. Vincent: Independence 1969?

Kingstown
St. Vincent, W.I.
May 11, 1969Mr. Richard Nolte
Executive Director
Institution of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

On Saturday, May 10, St. Vincent greeted Lord Shepherd, Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister who arrived on this 150 square mile island for discussions on independence. He came at the invitation of the Government, now headed by Mr. Milton Cato, Chief Minister and it is expected that Shepherd will stay in St. Vincent for five days. Talks will center on St. Vincent's future status with specific reference to Associated Statehood.



Of all the former British colonial territories, there remain only three islands in the Caribbean which are still colonies: the tiny island of Montserrat, the British Virgin Islands and St. Vincent.

During the May Day holidays, there were several rallies held throughout the island calling for independence in the form of Associated Statehood. Both Government and Opposition Parties have passed petitions and resolutions demanding that "a date be set as soon as possible for St. Vincent to become internally self-governing." Explaining Government's position on this issue, Acting Chief Minister, Mr. Sam Slater pointed out that "all the other islands in this region are either independent or moving that way and they are no better than St. Vincent." Slater, who is replacing an ailing Milton Cato, feels that St. Vincent is ready to become an Associated State, and that as soon as Grenada or St. Lucia or other Caribbean islands press for complete independence, St. Vincent will also do the same.

When asked about the island's future relationship to the United Nations, Government officials conclude that since Jamaica and Trinidad have become full members of the Organization, then St. Vincent should have the same association. "We will never accept a status without a vote," say Government officials, "if other islands in this region have a voice in the United Nations."

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Though Government and Opposition both are agreed on the need to press for Associated Statehood with Great Britain, there is conflict over the manner in which this will come about. Complex Constitutional problems have thus far barred progress for Statehood in spite of several meetings held over the past year between the two-party leaders and British Diplomats in London.

The nub of the matter involves the question of elections. Government under Milton Cato's leadership now holds a six-three majority of the Legislature's nine seats; and therefore, Government is loathe to hold new elections, having just gained political power after being an opposition party for 15 years. Opposition, on the other hand, claims that with the introduction of a new Constitution, elections should be held. Mr. Ebenezer Joshua, the former Chief Minister and now head of the opposition, People's Political Party, has even taken his case to the United Nation's Committee of Twenty Four.

Speaking before the Committee on March 4, 1969, Joshua claimed that the British Government, in collusion with Cato's Labour Party, have disregarded the Constitutional arrangements which had previously been worked out between Joshua's own Party when it was in power in 1968 and Her Majesty's Government. He also charged Cato with setting up a dictatorship on the island, adding that the British Administrator, Mr. Hywell George, was also prejudiced in Government's favour.

"Numerous examples of tyranny and despotism of ministers are on record. Most ridiculous of them all is the Chief Minister himself. In the town of Calliaqua, Mr. Cato ordered the police to arrest and charge a lad for using insulting language, to wit "Look at my Chief Minister; Joker; Joker." That lad was confined in a cell for over twenty-four hours before bail was granted."

"St. Vincent is now a police state, made so by the plans of Government ministers -- some with nothing to do in a supposedly poor Territory like the West Indies -- and a Chief of Police, called Sydney Anderson, who is a landed proprietor and a tool in the hands of the Government in victimizing Opposition members of the PPP."

"On Sunday, 9 February 1968, a large number of armed policemen surrounded the house of the Honourable Ivy Inez Joshua, Member of Council for North Windward in the Island of St. Vincent and wife of the Opposition leader, your petitioner, absent from that Colony since 10 January on constitutional matters in the United Kingdom. The police entered the premises, ransacked and smashed a case with books, confiscated private and unopened correspondence, and arrested and carried off Mrs. Joshua to the dungeons of Fort Charlotte on a trumped-up charge."

"Furthermore, a wave of oppressive legislation was passed during this excess -- for example, confiscatory legislation to end or terminate agreements without compensation, and retroactive legislation to forestall decisions of the Court and to amend penal legislation to make sure that the victims of the Government are punished on trumped-up charges."

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The tangled Constitutional mess in which the British Government finds itself and the wrangle of Vincentian politics has produced a high state of tension on the island. For the past few months, a British frigate has been in and out of the harbour of Kingstown and the British Administrator has requested that it remain in the vicinity of St. Vincent so long as the Joshua-Cato feud goes on.

The arrest of Joshua's wife, who is also a member of the Legislature, has not helped to defuse St. Vincent's politically explosive situation. And while preliminary hearings were initiated during Lord Shepherd's visit this week, the Constitutional problems, the question of elections and the political wrangling of the two parties may bring the entire crisis to a head sooner than expected.

On Monday, more than 10,000 supporters of Joshua's party demonstrated for Statehood elections. "Shepherd, We are not Sheep, Let us Go" was one of the placards carried through the streets of Kingstown that morning. Others read, "It is time for justice," "Down with Cato's oppression" and "Help us now." Lord Shepherd met the demonstrators at the Kingstown Court House, an old, two-story building in one wing of which the Hearing of Mrs. Ivy Inez Joshua was taking place. Then a 24-man delegation presented a petition to Shepherd calling for elections and for the withdrawal of Mr. George, the British Administrator. Shaking hands with some of the thousands of demonstrators, Shepherd declined to speak to them but instead withdrew with the Chief of Police, Commissioner Anderson. The massive demonstration was impressive and when Joshua spoke to his people, his voice must have duplicated the Biblical Joshua's sound as the rock of Jericho crumbled.



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Ebenezer Theodore Joshua is the most controversial political figure on the island of St. Vincent. He is adulated by the thousands who follow him; for these people, largely poor, rural farm workers, Joshua is the liberator. For others, mainly the white, wealthy planter class, "Josh" is a demon, "an irresponsible leader who has told his people to cut our throats like sheep." To the small number of Vincentian intellectuals, the teachers and economists in the Civil Service, "Josh is a good man to have in the opposition, a man of people, but not a very good Chief Minister."

Joshua left St. Vincent as a young man and went to Trinidad where he became a disciple of Uriah Butler, a grey-bearded union leader and one of the early champions of the poor West Indian working class. Joshua returned to St. Vincent in 1951 and with the help of George Charles, organized the Eight Army of the Liberation, forerunner of the PPP. In the first, full general elections held that year, Joshua's party swept the polls and for fifteen years he remained in power. His first political defeat, in 1967, was a result of political somersaulting by Sam Slater who defected from the P.P.P. which gave the then opposition, Cato's party, the majority in the Legislature (5-4).

As a Chief Minister, Joshua accomplished very little. And though many Vincentians claim that he finally began to be corrupted, took bribes and made deals with some American speculators, my judgment is that he only made several, grievous miscalculations and allowed several quick-witted businessmen to take advantage of him.

Most glaring of these deals were leases granted to Americans to develop some of the Grenadine islands which string out south of St. Vincent. These islands, small and undeveloped, were jewels which were dependent upon St. Vincent. One island, then called Prune Island and now known as Palm Island, was leased to an American developer for 50 cents a year for 181 years. Another, Cannuan Island, was leased for 50 years for the same figure, though happily it reverts back to the St. Vincent Government after that time has lapsed.

One other controversial scheme was the deep-water harbour franchise. The franchise to load and unload vessels in the harbour of Kingstown was given to a group of St. Vincent businessmen who were in fact the only ones who tendered for it. That these same businessmen happened to be Joshua supporters and had been financing his party for some time led many to suspect "money under the table." Bribery is doubtful, but what seems to be true is that Joshua made an unsound deal from Government's point of view. Consequently, when Cato's government came to power last year, the franchise was revoked and Government bought back the contract for 75,000 dollars. There is still litigation about this; but certainly one of the clearcut effects of the deep-water harbour scheme was the political damage it has done to Joshua.

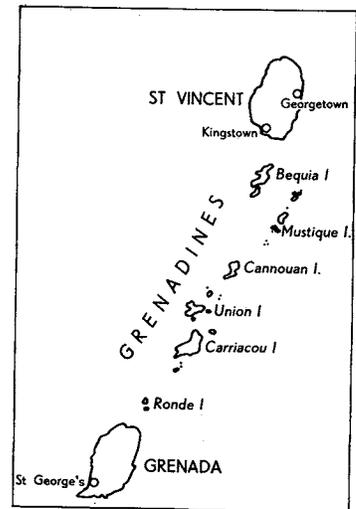
When one meets Ebenezer Joshua at his two-story Party headquarters in the heart of the old section of Kingstown, it is easy to understand why so many Vincentians love him even if they oppose him politically. His desk is a high, wooden, accountant's desk with a stool for a chair. The secretary is an old village woman with a ragged dress and no shoes. The room is hot and old, while hand-made benches serve as seats for those waiting to see the party leader.

Joshua arrives, wearing a grey homburg and a black suit, driven in a 1958 black Wosley by a chauffeur who looks more like a fisherman than a driver; and the charisma he has with his people is obviously due to the modulations of his voice which can be heard, soft or loud, throughout the entire neighborhood.

Left: Mr. Ebenezer Joshua



Below: Detailed map showing Cannouan island... Palm island is near Union island



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Now, however, Joshua is the opposition, and somehow one feels that he prefers to be on the attack. He seems to be more at home that way, and certainly Vincentian politics is more than anything else a constant series of attacks, usually irrational ones, made on the basis of personality rather than on some issue which could be sorted out reasonably.

In fact, neither Joshua's P.P.P. nor Cato's S.V.L.P. can be described as ideological. This is why, for example, Sam Slater was able to switch so easily from his solid seat in the P.P.P. to the opposition party. Vincentian politicians have actually made a tradition of playing musical chairs that way. To document this, one need only to look at the members of the last Legislature and examine their past party affiliations to understand that party politics in St. Vincent is not party politics in the tradition of a Mayor Daley.

Rather, these men run as individuals, in their own neighborhoods and affiliate themselves with a particular party on the basis of friendship or financial gain. For example, four members of the last Legislature -- Mr. Slater, Mr. Tannis, Mr. Latham and Mr. Young -- have all faced the previous four elections under varying party labels.

Slater's last defection was not his first. After beginning with the Army of Liberation in 1951 he became Independent in 1957 when he rejoined the P.P.P. up until his latest switch to Labour. Tannis was an Independent in 1958 when he joined Labour. In 1959 he joined the P.P.P. Latham was also an independent but joined the P.P.P. in 1956. However, following a quarrel with Joshua, Latham became a stalwart of the Labour Party in 1958.

Another old-time politician, George Charles, was one of the key organizers of the Army of Liberation. In 1954 he ran as an independent, then contested under the Peoples Labour Movement in 1957 then on a Labour ticket in 1961, while today he appears to have joined Joshua's P.P.P.

Today, both parties' supporters range throughout all levels of island society. And though Joshua's support is still primarily in the rural areas, he also has some solid, upper class white support which keeps him funded from time to time. Cato, on the other hand, has always had support from the middle class, only recently having been successful in the rural area.

To use the term "2-party politics" with regard to St. Vincent would, however, be a misnomer: First because there is no particular ideology affixed to either party programme (in fact, there are no programmes); second because there are no inherent mechanisms to enforce discipline within the parties; and third because all Vincentian politicians are individuals, elected on that basis, anyway.

This all makes St. Vincent politics seem rather anachronistic, a waste of limited energies and in the long run, harmful to the island's development. There is a case for abandoning this system for one which is more congenial to a small, undeveloped island ministate. As one islander commented "Storm-in-a-teacup controversies and dog-in-the-manger fights are created at the expense of the public welfare."

Some of the younger civil servants and those graduates from the University of the West Indies recently returned think that the present two-party system should be pushed aside by a third party which would establish a one-party ministate. The social and economic problems are so great, they say, that St. Vincent has not the energy nor time "to play the way these ol' fellows playin'."

These young intellectuals blame the British for imposing what they consider to be outmoded and unsuitable political and constitutional devices on their small island. And so in St. Vincent, and actually throughout the West Indies, there is a determination among the younger and better educated islanders to work out new institutions more adapted to the requirements of the Caribbean Islands.

One Vincentian, who is young and a university graduate, remarked: "The Constitutional proposals are a pale imitation of the British approach to politics which are generally taught to us as representative of the very acme of political development . . . but the pattern of British politics is shaped by a particular party system which we cannot institute by fiat."

On St. Vincent, with a population expanding at a rate of forty to every thousand yearly; with fifty percent of this population in their teens (45,000 Vincentians under 15 years of age); a per capita income \$285 B.W.I. (\$140 U.S.); with only 27% of the population completing grade school, five of every hundred completing secondary school and only 0.3% who have attended university; and with a balance of payments deficit of \$7.9 million, the young people concerned about their island will not long remain passive while their elders are content to mark time.

Nevertheless, Statehood will come to St. Vincent this year with all the strains and stresses the other Caribbean islands have recently experienced. Yet soon, as in many of the other islands, a "new breed" of university trained West Indians will assume the leadership of these islands. When this happens, changes will be made. And the days when an expatriate promoter is able to buy an island for a dollar a year, . . . or for any price - - will be over.

Yours,

Frank Mc Donald

Received in New York May 23, 1969.