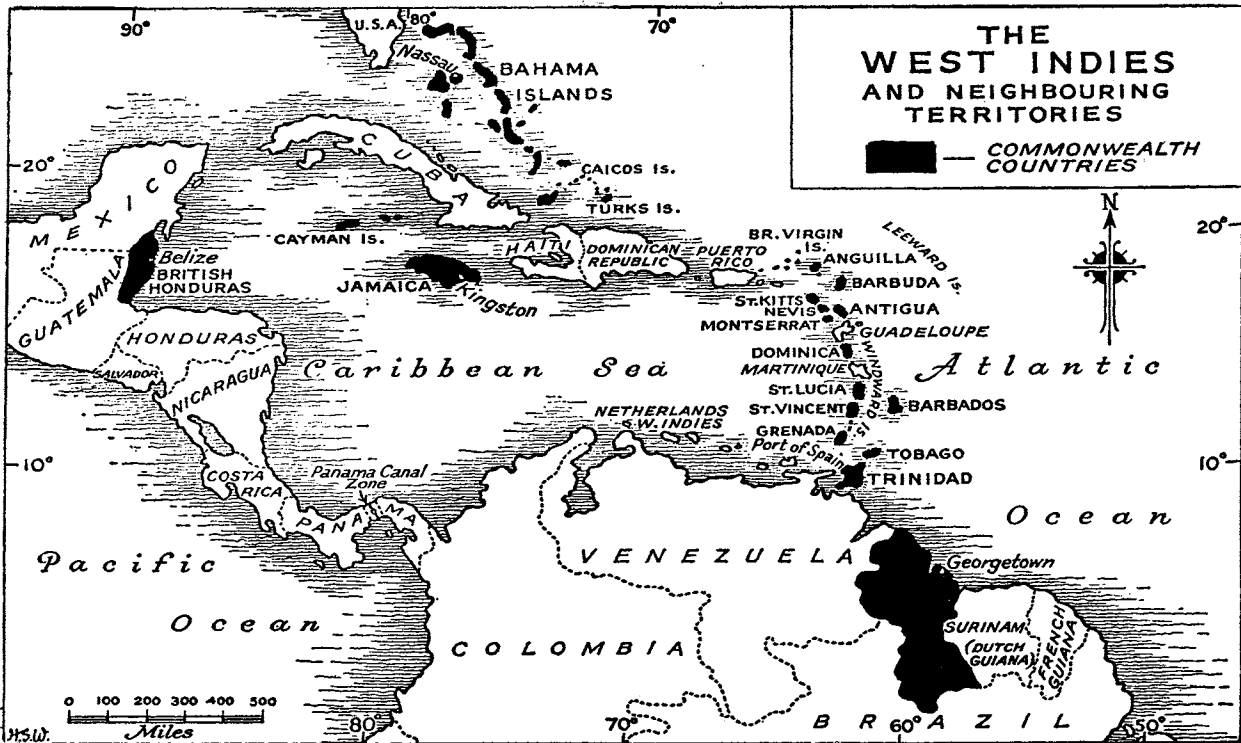


FJM-25 The Commonwealth Caribbean I  
 Burdens of the Past

Port of Spain, Trinidad  
 March 1, 1971



Throughout the island and mainland states of the Caribbean, a new nationalism is emerging, a nationalism that not only spurns the implied racism of the tourist-brochure images of the region, ("rent-a-villas come with rent-a-cooks, rent-a-maids, rent-a-nannies") but one that also increasingly rejects the economic domination of the North Atlantic. This nationalism is nowhere more evident than in the English speaking Caribbean where, during the past year and a half, the rise of the Black Power movement and a series of rebellions have altered forever the region's traditional political structures.

---

This newsletter is adapted from a chapter on the Commonwealth Caribbean states included in a forthcoming book, The United States and the Caribbean, edited by Tad Szulc and published by Prentice-Hall.

FJM-25



As the 1970's began, for example, uneasy governments of the Commonwealth Caribbean were initiating proceedings against Black Power leaders. In Barbados, Grenada and St. Lucia, there is a ban on all Black Power activity. In Jamaica, racial tension and state repression have made confrontation there a way of life. In Guyana, East Indians and Afro-Guyanese maintain an uneasy peace as the politics of Black Power begin to radicalize the black population there. And then, most significant of all, in Trinidad-Tobago, a mass movement of students, unemployed blacks, under-employed East Indians, powerful trade union leaders and a rebellious army nearly succeeded in creating what might have been the Caribbean's second nationalist revolution after Cuba. This near-miss at a Black Power revolution has resulted in a series of sedition trials that are going on today.

For the Commonwealth Caribbean, therefore, not a smile, but clenched fists are the images of the time. And the reasons are clear enough. After three hundred years of political dependency coupled with economic exploitation, the black, brown or red people of the islands object to the poverty of their present conditions. They know, that in spite of constitutional independence and the emergence of Afro-Caribbean politicians, they remain essentially an economically colonized people. More precisely, the mass of West Indians have begun to realize that the resources of the region and the manner in which those resources are utilized are North Atlantic prerogatives, that the proportion of the Caribbean's wealth that does accrue to the local population is limited, primarily, to the white or Afro-Saxon sectors of the society who are acting as representatives of North Atlantic interests.

Such conditions, underscored by an economically structured racism (white capital, black labor), have resulted in an increasingly active pan-Caribbean movement for change, a movement that seeks to promote the direct interests of the four million black people of the area who are suffering the poverty of the system most severely. The radical alternative to contemporary political and economic conditions is Black Power.

Black Power, not necessarily limited only to those of African origin, calls for an immediate and equitable ((as opposed to a "more equitable") re-distribution of resources: diversification of agricultural production coupled with land reform programs; localization and integration of the regional bauxite-aluminum, oil-petro-chemical and natural gas industries; localization and racial integration of the island tourist facilities; reclamation of land developments now controlled by North Atlantic real estate operators; establishment of regional insurance companies, banking systems and transport services; and development of a pan-Caribbean culture that will reflect the image of the region's population rather than the identity imposed upon them by a consumer-oriented, North American-controlled, mass media.

FJM-25

The Commonwealth Caribbean consists of 17 territorial units. Fifteen of these are islands or groups of islands. Two are mainland states. Together, these territories encompass a total land-mass of 105,325 square miles and a population of 5 million people. British Honduras (Belize) on the Central American mainland, marks the western outpost of the region. Then, east into the Caribbean Sea, a cluster of islands comprise the central grouping of the English-speaking states: The Bahamas, the Turks and Caicos Islands, the Cayman Islands and Jamaica. Then, again a thousand miles east, a chain of nine island states--flanked by Anguilla in the north and Trinidad in the south--arc toward the South American mainland and the Republic of Guyana, the southern outpost of the Commonwealth Caribbean. As a geographical unit then, the region forms a vital land-line between the two American continents, a link that gives to the area a pre-eminent economic and strategic value.

In terms of size, apart from the two mainland states (Guyana with 83,000 square miles and Belize with 8,000 square miles) the island components of the Commonwealth Caribbean are diminutive. Jamaica, for example, is the largest of the island territories but measures only 4,411 square miles. Trinidad is half that size (1,980 square miles). And Anguilla, the smallest of the island states, is only 16 miles long and 2.5 miles wide.



The Caribbean lands superimposed over the map of Europe

FJM-25

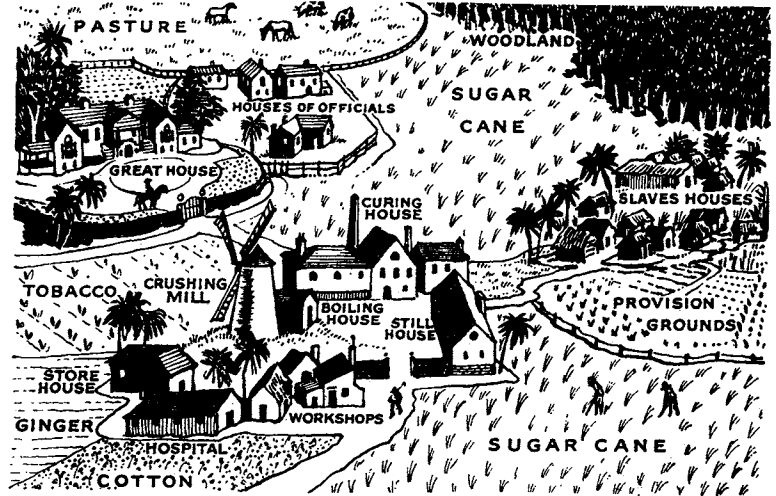
The constitutional status of the region's states varies from full independence to colonial dependency. Four of seventeen are fully independent and have full membership in the United Nations (Guyana, Trinidad-Tobago, Barbados and Jamaica). Eight are Associated States and are internally self-governing but dependent upon Great Britain for foreign affairs and defense (Antigua, St. Kitts-Nevis, Dominica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and Grenada). Four other territories, all very small, are still colonies (Cayman Islands, Turks and Caicos Islands, British Virgin Islands and Montserrat). Finally, there is tiny Anguilla, whose status is complicated as result of its secession from the unitary state of St. Kitts-Nevis-Anguilla in 1967.

The racial composition of these seventeen territories is extremely heterogeneous. The region incorporates Mayan Indians, Carib Indians, Amerindians, East Indians, Chinese, Europeans and Africans. Although there has been a great deal of miscegenation, particularly in Trinidad and Guyana, the predominant racial group of the region is African. These people, descendants of the eleven million men, women and children brought to the Americas in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, today total roughly 77 per cent of the region's population. As a result, the Commonwealth Caribbean is, as West Indian economist Lloyd Best says, "A House with an African personality."

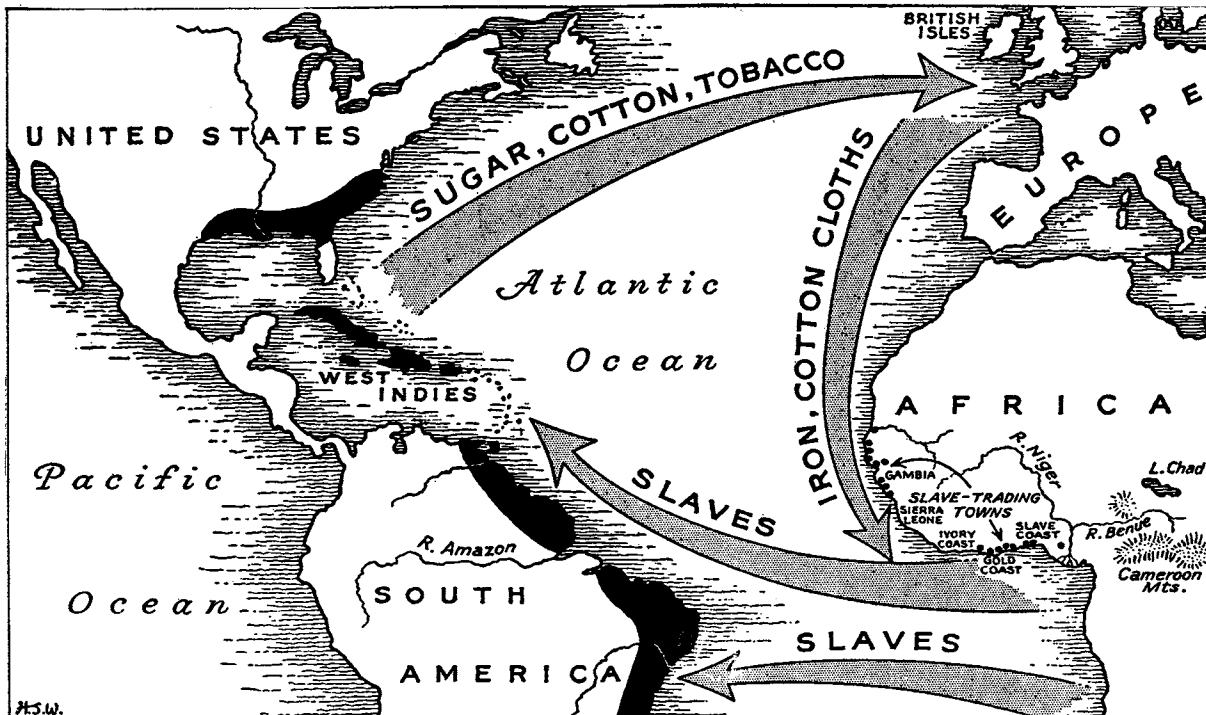
Commonwealth Caribbean history throughout has been a story of some form of exploitation. Essentially, the theme has been a mix of white-controlled capital and black labor brought together for the benefit of metropolitan interests. This history of exploitation breaks down, roughly, into three periods: first, two hundred years of colonization and slavery (1623-1834) during which the London-based merchants, a colonial plantocracy and slaves serviced the industrial revolution of Great Britain; second, eighty years of direct British rule (1865-1945) when the post-emancipated West Indians suffered under the harsh conditions of tenant-labor and laissez-faire; and third, the contemporary period (1945-present) when the development of trade union movements and universal suffrage resulted in constitutional advancement. Meanwhile, during the past quarter century, there has been little change in the traditional white-capital, black-labor mix that still operates for the benefit of the North Atlantic economies.

The British colonialists first came to the Caribbean three hundred years ago, when, in 1623, Scottish, Irish and English settlers migrated to St. Kitts, Antigua and Barbados. In these islands, they first cultivated tobacco without great success. Sugar proved to be more suitable, attracting higher prices on the London market. In order to secure markets and profits, however, a large supply of cheap labor was required. For this reason, patterned after the Spanish, the

FJM-25



17th century sugar plantation



FJM-25

British colonialists began importing slaves from Africa. The first company chartered by the British Crown, The Royal African Company, began trading an average of 3,000 slaves annually in 1663. By 1791, there were over forty companies shipping slaves from Africa to the Caribbean.

Slave labor alone was not enough, however, to ensure a high rate of profit return for the island planters. Competition from other colonies, particularly from India, cut into the West Indian profit margin--so much so that the planters sought protection in the form of tariffs from the British government. In time, loans were also required to expand the acreage planted in sugar. For both of these needs--increases in tariffs and capital--the West Indian planters sought out London merchants who could act as lobbyists and financiers. By performing both these functions, the London investors and merchants inevitably assumed control of all financing, shipping and marketing of the colonial sugar industry. In short, the focus of economic power gradually shifted from the Caribbean colonies to the brokerage houses of London.

Protectionism and the mercantilist system rendered the West Indies totally dependent upon metropolitan interests, a dependency that has established the adverse economic patterns which persist, in more subtle forms, until today. First, intra-island and intra-regional commercial exchange was, in effect, prohibited because the only lines of trade allowed to develop were those between the individual plantations and the mother country. Second, as a result of metropolitan interests and Balkanization, only a single-crop economy was encouraged--and diversification discouraged--since industrial goods and other commodities were imported from, and were a source of profits to, the mother country. Third, the plantations produced sugar in a raw, muscavado form only, further processing being reserved for metropolitan industries. Fourth, capital was not accumulated in the Caribbean, but rather in London where the merchants or absentee-owners were compensated for their investments. (This capital was not re-invested in the colonies but directed into the industrial development of the metropolitan). Fifth, as a result of protectionism and slavery, the island economies became increasingly inflexible. Little or no structural transformation occurred within the sugar industry since if markets expanded, more slaves were imported and more crop cultivated; if markets contracted, rationing for the slaves and other devices were used to cut costs and overhead.

What was then called the Golden Age of Sugar ended by the middle of the 19th century when the British Parliament abolished slavery, emancipated the slaves in the colonies and legislated against the protective tariffs granted its colonies in the Caribbean. The slave trade was abolished in 1807 and the emancipation of all slaves was legislated by Parliament in 1832.

FJM-25

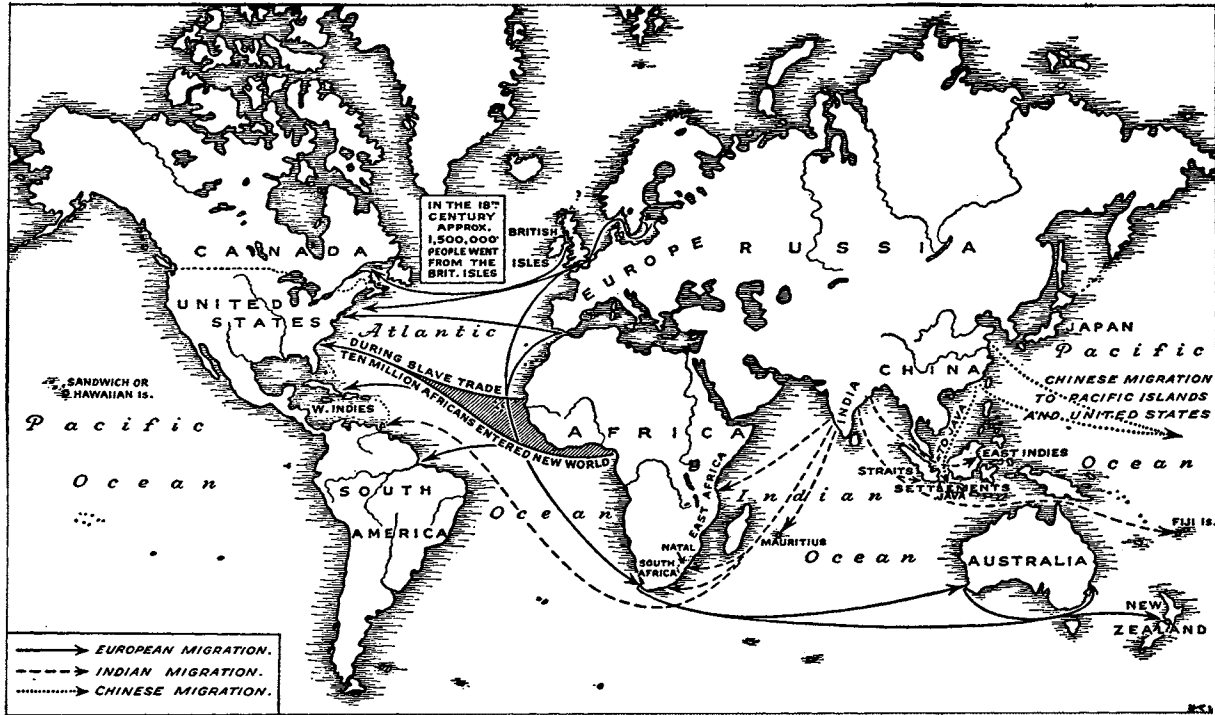
Such parliamentary action was not the result of any humanitarian sentiment in Great Britain, however. On the contrary, British manufacturers, labor unions and politicians lobbied for the development of free trade and free labor because they were convinced that protectionism and slavery prevented the expansion of Britain's markets and trade with other European powers. Economists such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo and others from the Manchester School argued persuasively that free trade would assist England's industrial development and that expanded markets would be good for manufacturer and laborer alike.

In the colonies, however, laissez-faire left the island economies languishing. For the post-emancipation West Indian population, there was little difference between the servile conditions of slavery and the oppressive tread-mill of tenant labor that persisted after 1846. The black population remained on the plantations and worked in payment for estate-owned housing and commodities bought in estate-controlled shops.

In terms of political rights, the black West Indian was no better off than he had been in the pre-abolition society, since property qualifications and other obstacles kept him disenfranchised and subject to Crown Colony rule. This period, lasting eighty years (1865-1945) was, officially, a time of preparation toward the day when, sufficiently groomed, the people of the Caribbean would be able to assume the responsibilities of self-government. During that time, the Colonial Office saw itself as the main instrument for instructing the people in parliamentary democracy, as "arbiter" between the interests of the old plantocracy and the needs of the newly emancipated population.

In reality, however, the doctrine of Imperial Trusteeship, first developed by the Parliamentarian, Edmund Burke, and its institutional expression, Crown Colony Rule, masked a British rejection of black West Indian franchise, a fear of the idea of black rule and a consequent collapse of the socio-economic status-quo. During the 1840's, in fact, a major debate among intellectuals of the day was the "Colonial Question". Many of Britain's leading thinkers argued for retention of the Caribbean colonies: Thomas Carlyle, in his Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question, argued for a return to slavery. Anthony Trollope, the novelist, ridiculed the notion that West Indian blacks could govern themselves; and James Froude, then professor of Modern History at Oxford University, taught that black rule in the Caribbean would be a disaster ("An English Governor would be found presiding over a black council, obliged to read speeches written for him by a black Prime Minister...No English gentlemen could consent to occupy so absurd a position.").





FJM-25

When, in 1934, the price of sugar fell to five shillings a hundredweight, massive unemployment, food shortages and discontent spread throughout the Caribbean. From 1936 to 1938, in St. Kitts, Barbados, Guyana, Trinidad, Jamaica and other islands, a wave of popular unrest, demonstrations, riots and strikes showed that the breaking point had finally been reached.

As discontent spread, West Indians, in every state from lower and middle classes alike, arose to organize these spontaneous uprisings. Whoever had charisma, courage or ability, who could reach the pulse of the people's indignation, became a hero for the crowds. Men such as Grantley Adams in Barbados or Norman Manley and Bustamante in Jamaica began channeling that nationalism and energy, first by organizing trade union movements (over a seven year period more than 60 trade unions were formed), then by founding political parties that eventually formed governments.

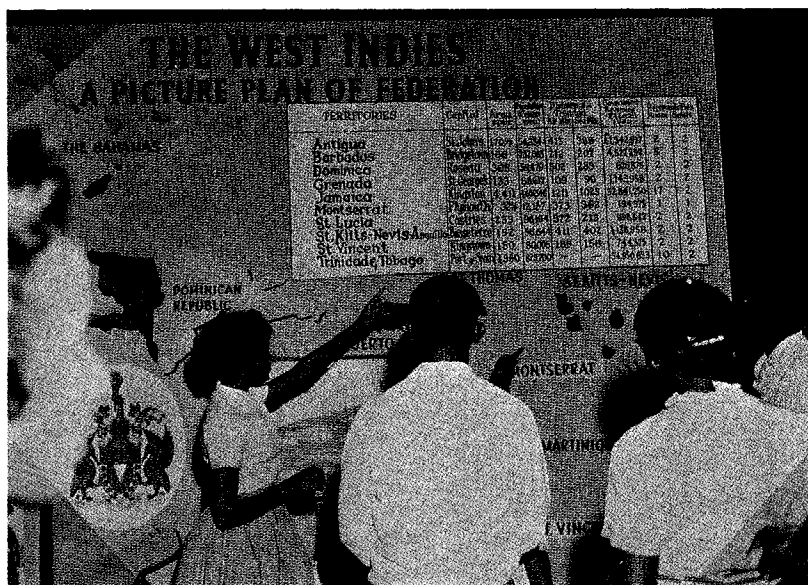
For it is one of the most persistent themes in Caribbean politics that the men who, in the late 1930's, filtered through the crowded streets, emerged from the crowds and organized the people, were also those who, subsequently, led the movement for constitutional independence. They have dominated the politics of the Commonwealth Caribbean states ever since. With the significant exception of Dr. Eric Williams in Trinidad, the majority of Commonwealth Caribbean leaders today have arisen through the trade union movements: Hugh Shearer in Jamaica; Forbes Burnham in Guyana; Erroll Barrow in Barbados; Eric Gairy in Grenada; John Compton in St. Lucia, George Walters in Antigua; Robert Bradshaw in St. Kitts; and Lyndon O. Pindling in the Bahamas. In many instances, St. Vincent, for example, the opposition party is also headed by a trade union leader.

The spontaneous actions of the West Indian population and the subsequent development of politically active trade unionism pushed the British Government into initiating a series of study groups, Royal Commissions and constitutional conferences "directed toward establishing a form of self-government suitable for the Caribbean colonies." Discussions held over a fourteen year period (1944-58) finally resulted in what the British intended to be the principal mechanism for regional independence--The West Indian Federation.

This Federation, composed of ten colonial territories, incorporated the major part of the West Indian population. Officially inaugurated in April, 1958, these territories formed a political union governed by a Federal Parliament, Federal ministers elected by the regions' four million inhabitants and an administrative superstructure intended to co-ordinate the economic development of

FJM-25

the Commonwealth Caribbean. However, after four years, from lack of support from the masses of the region and other personal, geographical and administrative difficulties, the Federal experiment collapsed. The major event in this regard was the 1961 decision of the Jamaican people to withdraw from the Federal Union, leaving Trinidad and the other eight island states of the Eastern Caribbean to carry on alone. At this point, Trinidad's Prime Minister, Eric Williams, decided to abandon the Union as well, and expressed his conclusions regarding the fate of the Federation in a single pithy remark: "Ten minus one leaves zero".



With the collapse of the West Indian Federation in 1961, Britain was obliged to grant each of the larger territories individual independence. Jamaica, the first West Indian state to achieve independent status, became sovereign in August, 1962. Trinidad followed shortly in the same month. By 1966, both Barbados and Guyana had become fully independent and also members of the United Nations. For the remaining territories, a semi-independent status (Associated Statehood) was established in 1967. These islands became internally self-governing but remained dependent upon Britain for foreign affairs and defense. Written into each of the constitutions of the Associated

FJM-25

States, however, is the proviso that, at any time, following a referendum and six months notice, that state may ask for and be granted unilaterally, full independence.

*Frank McDonald*

Frank McDonald