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ANGUILLA: Independence 1967-69  
And some important reactions

Anguilla, W.I.  
January 15, 1969

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Dear Dick:

On December 31, 1968, the Anguillian Government sent a letter to Lord Chalfont, Minister of State for Commonwealth Affairs. In the letter, signed by Ronald Webster for the Government of Anguilla, the case for Anguilla's independence and its position vis-a-vis Her Majesty's Government was carefully outlined. The letter, a position paper and statement of future intentions in one, was debated, written, rewritten and then unanimously accepted by the entire Island Council. It was a lucid expression of compromise between those in the Council who were pressing for a clean break with HMG and St. Kitts on the one hand, and those who wanted to retain British ties and were cautioning against an over-played declaration of independence on the other.

The substance of the letter is contained in the following excerpts taken from it:

"Just over a year ago, the Council of Anguilla extended an invitation to Her Majesty's Government to designate a Senior British Official to remain on Anguilla for an Interim Period.....No agreement to extend that Interim Period has been reached...(and) it has come to an end.

With the ending of the agreed Interim Period, Anguilla re-acquires the full independence and freedom of action which it had prior to our letter of December 18, 1967. On July 12, 1967 Mr. Peter Adams, for the Government of Anguilla, cabled Mrs. Judith Hart, then Minister of Commonwealth Relations, as follows:-

"Overwhelming referendum confirms absolute and final independence of Anguilla from St. Kitts. This leaves no formal legal ties with Crown. We wish to explore status of Associated State or other arrangement of freedom and local self government within Commonwealth."

"This letter re-affirms that that is and remains our position as to the legal status of Anguilla.

After a year and a half of discussion it is unlikely that further discussion alone will cause either H.M.G. or Anguilla to accept the other's view. The question is how best to proceed under these circumstances.

....toward the ultimate resolution of this situation we make the following statement of position, request and invitation:-

(1) The Government of Anguilla will continue to refrain from all hostile action against St. Kitts provided that there is no attempt by....St. Kitts-Nevis directly or indirectly to use force against this island or its people.

(2) ...On April 8, 1968, we called to the attention of the Commonwealth Office certain information relating to military preparations by the Government of St. Kitts-Nevis and ....requested 'an assurance from H.M.G. that Britain will not permit the use of force against Anguilla...from any quarter.' We now renew that request.

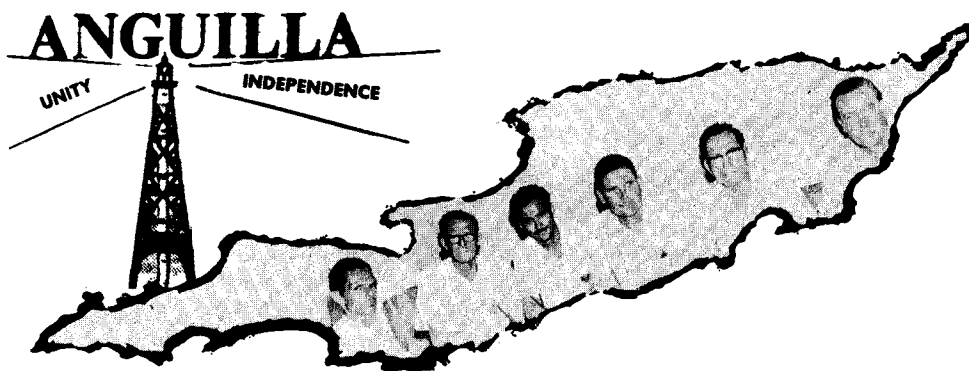
(3) We again invite H.M.G. to designate a Senior British Official to remain on Anguilla, this time for an indeterminate period....(who)...would continue to have access to Government papers and documents and be available to represent the interests of Her Majesty's Government.... and (who) will also be invited to attend Council meetings to give advice, which the Council is free to accept or reject. Anguilla will continue not to recognise the Senior British Official as having any administrative authority over the internal affairs of the island....

(4) We welcome....a continued exercise by H.M.G. of a general responsibility for most of the external affairs and defence of Anguilla...including passport matters...

(5) On one matter, however, that of clarification and recognition of Anguilla's status, the situation is different. ....Anguilla must....reserve for itself the freedom to explore its international status directly with others who may not feel themselves....encumbered by a prior and mistaken act of the British Parliament...."

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It is difficult to project what might have happened had Webster and the Council waited a bit or even renewed the Interim Agreement for another six months (for which Tony Lee and H.M.G. had asked up to the very last saying that within that time "matters" might well have been straightened out to Anguilla's satisfaction). Yet under the circumstances, with Webster pressing for an immediate re-affirmation of independence, for even a stronger statement, the Anguilla letter was a firm yet reasonable document. Once sent however, the tenuous diplomatic ties which held Anguilla and Great Britain together were placed under a severe strain. The various reactions from the Government of St. Kitts-Nevis, from other Caribbean states and from H.M.G. as well came within a few days' time. There was little Anguilla could cheer about from any of them.



From Left: Ronald Webster, Chief Executive;  
John Webster, Director of Civil Service;  
Atlin Harrigan, Councilman and Editor of THE  
BEACON; Emile Gumbs, Councilman; Walter Hodge,  
Treasurer and at far Right Tony Lee, Senior  
British Official now departing Anguilla

The reactions of several leaders from other Caribbean States came from London earlier in the week. Attending a meeting of Heads of State from Commonwealth countries, three Ministers from the Caribbean responded when asked about Anguilla's situation. The Prime Minister of Jamaica, Mr. Hugh Shearer, was vague and hedged with the comment that he would have to see what other Ministers had

to say (in reality the response from H.M.G.). Mr. Forbes Burnham, Prime Minister of troubled Guyana, said that he hoped for a peaceful settlement and that Anguilla might have returned to St. Kitts-Nevis were the Anguillans given more autonomy by the St. Kitts Government. Prime Minister Erroll Barrow of Barbados was the most articulate and responsive to the question of Anguilla's present circumstances:

"As a Country which has recently become independent, our attitude is consistent with the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights; and that is that we believe in the right of all people to self-determination. The Anguilla question is slightly confused by the thought that it is a secession.....of a people who are part of a Unitary State and not a people who are a part of a.....Colonial Empire. I cannot agree with the head of the Council of Anguilla to make a Unilateral Declaration of Independence from.....the Commonwealth. (Anguilla) should not as an integral part of the State of St. Kitts-Nevis-Anguilla take any step constitutionally to change positions without the agreement of the British Government and everybody else concerned."

Obviously, the various Heads of other Caribbean States were waiting for the British response.

By Friday morning, 10 January, the Premier of St. Kitts-Nevis, Mr. Robert Bradshaw, gave his reaction to Webster's letter over the St. Kitts' radio. Bradshaw began by saying that events in Anguilla had taken "a silly dive last week" as a result of Webster's letter to Her Majesty's Government--an event, Bradshaw noted, that "looks like treason".

Reading, then, from the first two paragraphs of Webster's document, Bradshaw began to outline the consequences he foresaw from such an action:-

- (1) By declaring the Interim Period at an end, Webster had made Tony Lee's position on Anguilla legally impossible.
- (2) Webster has failed to run Anguilla according to the laws of the State

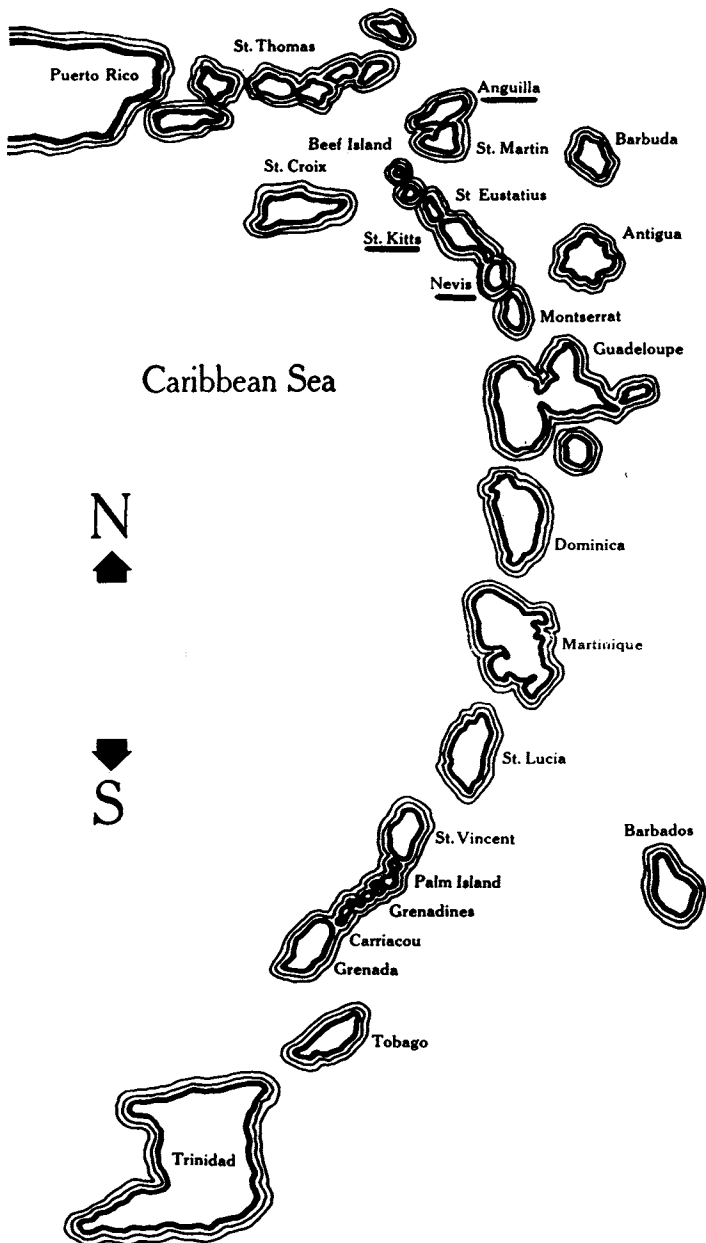
With these two very obvious statements, Bradshaw then began to list all the events ("several curious things") which have taken place on Anguilla during the past year. He noted the burning of a plane and the doctor's home, the "shooting to death of a young girl" and the "threatening of the manager of the Bank of America by gunpoint...which forced him to leave Anguilla". At the moment however, the Bank manager is still living on the island, and when I asked him what he thought of Premier Bradshaw's remarks, this young American from San Francisco quipped that about the only thing that was a threat to him were the sand fleas.

Continuing in the same vein, Bradshaw described Webster's letter as having "set Anguilla rudderless upon a perilous sea of grave uncertainty, leaving its public property open to any grabber, unable to direct its own course". He noted that "drifting things usually end up on the shoals, there to be battered to pieces by cruel waves.....a fate which now stares (Anguillans) in the face".

He then announced that "in view of Webster's actions" there would be a suspension of all trade and postal services between St. Kitts and Anguilla. All air and sea travel between the two island would also be stopped. (This has been the case anyway for the past 18 months). Finishing, Bradshaw remarked that "Webster and his cohorts have forced us to take these measures in the same way as other rebels some 300 miles from Georgetown in the hills of Guyana have forced Prime Minister Forbes Burnham to use severe measures against them to restore law and order to that part of the country".

And so Bradshaw had made his position clear, even though in doing so all the facts were not quite accurate; he spoke clearly with the hope that Webster's "treason" would gain for him the solid support if not sympathy of Her Majesty's Government and the other Caribbean States.

Meanwhile, on the same day, the 10th of January, the all-important reply from H.M.G. came over the wire. London informed Lee that it had no choice but to withdraw him from Anguilla, and that he, the Special British Official designated as H.M.G.'s representative during the Interim Agreement, would have to depart no later than the 17th of the month. (Lee will remain in the Caribbean, on nearby Antigua, for six months in an effort to work out some other solution to the St. Kitts-Anguilla conflict)



(Map courtesy of Leeward Islands Air Taxi)

No doubt that Bradshaw's statement earlier in the day had been a sure sign that Britain had no intention of leaving Lee on the island and that H.M.G. had decided to back constitutional rule. The difficulties Britain is now facing over Rhodesia, Nigeria and Kenya obviously did little to help Anguilla's case.

What then are the implications of Webster's letter and the consequent British reply? First of all, now that Lee is withdrawn, it is clear that the Anguillans cannot hope to count on help or support from other Caribbean states--not even Jamaica or Barbados, where in the past there has been some sympathy for their cause.

Further, Lee's departure will deprive Anguilla of all direct aid from Great Britain; all V.S.O.s will have to find other sources of financial support or else leave the island; and most damaging, Bradshaw may force H.M.G. to stop the free circulation of Anguilla's "Independence Stamps" (from which the Island Government derives 45% of its budgeted income) and suppress the British Passports its citizens now carry.

There may also be internal repercussions on Anguilla. Many Anguillans are very pro-British and some may take Lee's departure as a sign of too much irresponsibility on Webster's part. They may blame him for forcing the British out. A general breakdown of law and order may result. In the West End particularly (Webster is from the East End of the Island) there are rumblings about his leadership which could

cause a serious political split on the island. Last night for example, the Government Custom's House at Blowing Point was burned down. Arson is suspected. And though it may well have been a "bradshaw" (an Anguillian term for someone supporting a return to St. Kitts) it may have been the first sign of some resistance to Webster's rule of the Island. If Webster were forced to appoint a successor, or call for new elections, the test Anguillans would face in searching for and accepting a new leader would be substantial. Anguillans are an anarchic people to begin with; and now unity may be a fragile thing.

So, it is back to square one (or as one British civil servant said, "minus square one....it's going to be double times more difficult to have Britain return...") with Anguilla certain to encounter an onslaught of speculators, quick money solutions, power grabbers and attempted take-overs both from within and from without the island. Once again, the Anguillian Government will have to seek private assistance from the United States or from Canada. For those who have gone through this once before the challenge and prospects are staggering. Whether in fact the Anguillans are up to such a testing is debatable; though no one would dare to say that it is an impossible one for them. They have proven others wrong before and are really at their best when faced with difficulties. In any case, the ball has returned from Britain's court, the lines have been drawn and it is up to the Anguillans from now on to keep it in play.

Yours,

*Frank M. Donald*

Frank McDonald

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