

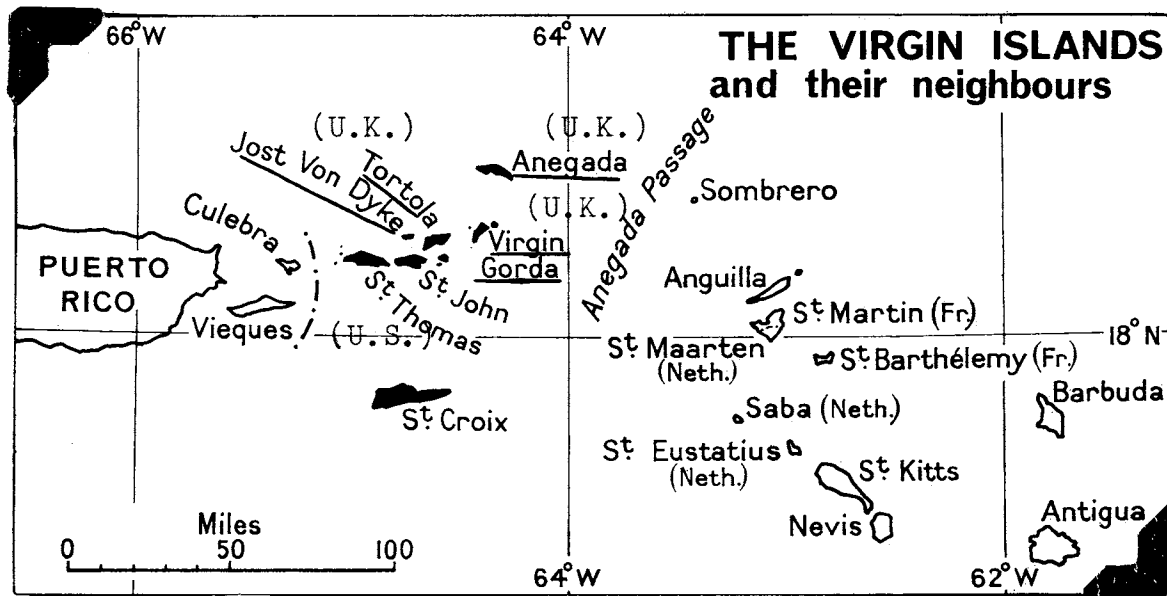
INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

FJM-6
 The British Virgin Islands:
 Problems of Rapid Development

Tortola,
 British Virgin Islands
 February 25, 1969

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
 Institute of Current World Affairs
 535 Fifth Avenue
 New York, 10017, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:



Casually visiting the smaller "underdeveloped" islands in the Caribbean, one finds the quiet, peaceful places about which an eager traveller dreams. The beaches are beautiful and though a bit difficult to reach, a small mini-moke can roll easily over the gravel roads and small pot holes along the way. The locals are rugged, easy going, smiling people, and they're curious about the visitors who come to see their beaches, wondering what is so unusual about such sunny days.

The islanders, however are more sophisticated than they appear. They do dream of building their own house on the far ridge of the bit of land they own, of getting a small car to transport them about the island, of having more water in the cistern and maybe someday of having hot water in the home. The sons of an island family usually go to other, "more developed" islands to find work where they manage to save enough to send part of a paycheck home to their family, who, without it, would have little else on which to survive. In twenty

years perhaps, these men return to the island, marry and raise a family on the savings they have managed to accumulate. It is then back home that they ask why their own island isn't developed and why it is that they and the other men of their generation have had to leave to find employment.

In time, pressure builds up on the local government to do something about lack of development. A consultant writes a report, normally about fifty pages long, printed, containing many statistics and saying that among other things the prospective developers (rich American businessmen) are very sensitive to certain elusive factors such as political stability, to attitudes the locals have toward foreigners (as evidenced by smiles and a wave or two), to the tone and context of various laws which apply to them, and to the speed Government is able to show in making decisions.

As a consequence of the report, "infrastructure" is the key word. An airport is started (ideal: one that allows large jets to land), the roads are paved, taxi stands are posted at all strategic points and the locals are instructed in the best way in which to greet incoming tourists. At high points in the tourist season, a steelband might even be placed in the airport to set the proper, Caribbean scene for the uninitiated tourist.

And the "developers" do come. They are very efficient men: they buy the land (in many islands every bay or anse is already completely bought up), build big hotels, travel agencies, restaurants, night clubs, gambling casinos and other facilities which makes "extensive development", that is, extensive tourism, a reality.

In the meantime, for the islanders, development isn't exactly what they had expected, though in many ways life is better than it has been in the past. For some, affluence has come. They own a car now, and perhaps even a television. Their sons are able to remain at home instead of emigrating to find a job. The island is more prosperous and there are cinemas, perhaps a small theatre and an entire new range of things to buy in the shops.

However, there are new problems as well. Most often, the islanders feel that they are taking second spot to the more prosperous, alien population. Worse, as second stringers economically, the islanders, particularly the labouring class, view themselves as second class citizens. They soon resent the impression that government appears to be catering to the interests of wealthy tourists or expatriate businessmen rather than dealing with their own medical and educational needs. They sense that they are fated to remain servants in a white man's world, that the ownership of the land as well as the hotels, restaurants and businesses, has passed to a group of aliens, and that their relationship to these aliens is similar to the one their fathers had with the colonialists before emancipation.

Economically, even though the islanders have more money than they would otherwise have acquired, they find that prices have also risen extravagantly so that on the whole their position as buyer hasn't been greatly improved. For those locals who are not employed in the hotels or restaurants, or who have perhaps remained fishermen and farmers attempting to raise a living outside of the mainstream of tourist development, the rise in the cost of living is staggering.

Politically, the local citizens discover that they have very little power to alter these conditions. Government has become dependent upon the alien community for its income and is fixated by the idea that progress is represented by the number of tourists who visited the island during the past year. As a result, in a few years (particularly on a very small island) the local population finds itself frozen into a political, social and economic second class citizenship.

The British Virgin Islands (total area 60 square miles, population 8,000) lying some 60 miles east of Puerto Rico and only a few miles east of the United States Virgin Islands, are at the stage where roads have been paved, an airport is being constructed (Her Majesty's Government has sent 100 officers and men of the British Army to Tortola, to build a runway large enough for jets to land) and a few travel agencies have popped up. A yacht marina is being developed and four banks have begun operations. The first few hotels have been completed and a "package deal" is contracted for the development of a complete tourist complex for Anegada (one of the four principal islands in the B.V.I.) which, in its first stage will cost \$20 million. This project will include at least 12 hotels, several marinas, a 3600 foot jet airstrip and several public parks.

Government is trying to regulate this development in such a way as to prevent the islands from becoming as "crowded", over-developed and chaotic as St. Thomas, in the United States Virgin Islands, has become. The Chief Minister of this small Crown Colony, the Honorable H.L. Stout, commented on the large influx of aliens who have settled in the B.V.I. (since 1961, the resident, alien population has risen from 20 to over 1,000 on Tortola alone):

"The comparatively rapid influx of numbers of people from outside the Colony has had the discernible effect of causing tensions within some parts of the community due to a feeling that local people are being relegated to a role of spectators in the development that is taking place. To a certain degree such a reaction is natural and inevitable but it is the aim of Government ... to achieve a harmonious balance between the interests and sensibilities of local people and the entitlements of those persons from outside without whose capital and efforts little progress would be possible".

Yet there are tensions in the British Virgin Islands. One islander, Mr Conrad Maduro, the founder of a local political party, expressed the resentment of those who feel frustrated and left out of the development process. "The Government is catering to outsiders", he said, and he accused the Chief Minister, Mr Stout, of being "a dictator who was not listening to the people". Pointing to a report written by a British Government observer, Mr Maduro quoted its conclusion that indeed there is a "chasm existing between the Government and the people".

Mr Maduro's plight is the same as many fellow British Virgin Islanders who are standing back and watching the big-time developers rush about the island financing, building, incorporating while leaving the poorer, less educated, eventually resentful islanders only to gawk.

On the other hand, there is the view of Mr Steven Dickenson, an accountant who left England and immigrated to Tortola in 1963. Dickenson is young and enthused with the potential of the islands. He is also doing extremely well and the shelves of his office are filled with audits and financial reports he has completed for new enterprises now operating in the Caribbean. Mr Dickenson was casual and unconcerned about Mr Maduro's attitude: "He's the island maverick and his only problem is one of power; if he had more of the cake he'd be satisfied".

Yet ironically that is precisely the problem. Mr Maduro might well be a trouble maker or a "maverick", but he is an islander who represents the inarticulate feelings of many of his peers. Beyond this small episode the problem is significant. It involves the terribly complex question of equal and just sharing in the rapid development of the Caribbean, the economic and political difficulties local governments have in controlling such rapid change. The average American developer has not considered this fact and in most cases is unaware of or unconcerned with the feelings of the local inhabitants apart from the Government. Yet Conrad Maduro is the sort of man who is touching upon the most sensitive of the problems these islands are encountering today, problems the departing British and incoming Americans have yet to really explore.

Yours,

Frank M. Donald

Received in New York February 28, 1969.