

A MATTER OF BLACK AND WHITE PERSPECTIVES OR FACTUAL OBJECTIVITY? – THE PROS AND CONS OF INDEPENDENCE

I INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to canvas the perceived constructs upon which, unfortunately, many people, privately and openly, for or against Independence, black and white, rich and not so rich, attempt to buttress and advance their respective positions. For those who hold opinions on either side of the debate, this is an EMOTIVE (even emotional) topic. Indeed, that is as it should be.

Independence is a life-altering process and event – a ‘rebirth’ if you will. This paper is to call upon, even provoke, members of the BIC to ‘cut through’ the emotions and to examine the topic of Independence factually, dispassionately and objectively in the ‘clear light of day.’ Has Bermuda FACTUALLY and OBJECTIVELY achieved the basis for a transition to political Independence or not? This has to be the fundamental consideration. If there is a ‘subjective’ resistance to Independence, what is the historical basis for this subjective resistance and is it justified, particularly today?

What are the demonstrative benefits and demerits of a transition to Independence and what is, on balance, the net effect? Is there a BLACK view and a WHITE view of Independence? Or is there substance to the ‘construct’ that today’s Bermuda is far more diverse in its ‘views’ on the topic as a result of changed and changing culture(s), background(s) opinions and ideologies?

Are the PROS and CONS in respect of the topic, far more complex and extensive than a simplistic BLACK or WHITE view? The persons who fell within the “ mixed “ or non-black/white racial or cultural groups expressed the sentiments of the two dominant groups. They were for, indifferent and against Independence for primarily the same reasons as the two dominant groups whether they were Bermudian or non-Bermudian. Does ‘ race or culture ‘ really play a part, significant or otherwise, in one’s preference for or against Independence?

These are some of the fundamental questions that this paper is inviting BIC to explore and to provide answers or resolutions for.

II SOME OF THE VIEWS IN THE COMMUNITY:

Unfortunately, to date, the discourse on Independence has largely been reduced and confined to an argument that there is a white view and there is a black view on the topic and 'never the twain shall meet.' In fact, peoples' opinions may be much more varied and diverse than the "leading" and prevalent perceptions present. Or, are they? Does history hold the answer?

For illustrative purposes, it might be helpful to present some of the "leading" (or misleading) views, their possible origins, what these opinions' role has been in shaping and moulding other opinions and how these "leading" views have been intermingled with race (and even, class) and finally, which group(s) have perpetuated and propagated these views over the generations, to the extent that today these opinions have taken on the ' mantle ' of convention and truth.

Some black people hold the view that the perceptions they have in favour of Independence have been shaped as a result of their ancestors' resistance to slavery and the colonization of Bermuda by the British in the early 1600s. That up until November 9, 1998 they suffered the indignities of varying and various forms of discrimination, denial of human and civil rights, and prejudice by the descendants of the slave masters and colonialists. That their entire lives have been socialized by Anglo-Saxon values. That Independence, coupled with a P.L.P. Government, will provide them the final EMANCIPATION from white control and hegemony and an opportunity to 'govern' a country in its entirety, free of colonialism, in lieu of the one(s) lost by their ancestors in Africa to the white colonists and British Government.

Younger blacks, who support Independence, have expressed the view that they want to govern an Independent Bermuda in concert with other white Bermudians but in an atmosphere where the 'past' is not forgotten but 'put in perspective.' Where the 'past' is not a stumbling block to the future. On the other hand, other blacks, both young and older, have expressed the view that they are against Independence because the present P.L.P. Government is not addressing the social needs of the community at present and therefore could not effectively lead an independent Bermuda.

Yet again, there are other blacks who say they are INDIFFERENT to whether Bermuda transitions to Independence or not but, in any event, they require more information before they make up their minds one way or the other. This indifference amongst some

blacks cuts across class lines. The 'upper-class' blacks who express that they are indifferent say it won't change their 'economic status' so they are not bothered one way or the other. Will Independence make them richer? Those of lower income say, for similar reasons, Independence won't change their 'economic status' anyway. Will Independence bring more and better jobs? In either case, there is seldom a mention of national pride or the opportunity to represent themselves on the world stage.

Several whites directly, and via relatives, black associates and friends indirectly; declare that they are generally against or indifferent to Independence. Especially so, with the granting of British passports recently. They scarcely see any 'economic social or political benefit' of Independence. Many claim direct descendency to British relatives living in the United Kingdom and are quite happy with the Union Jack proper or in the 'Bermudian' form (the Union Jack on a red background). Their national pride is derived from the achievements of the U.K., not Bermuda.

Many older whites (whose views do not always find favour with some younger whites who are against Independence) hold the view that "if blacks achieve Independence, Blacks will view it as the final emancipation and will exact revenge upon whites for past injustices in the manner of Mugabe's Zimbabwe". Others have expressed the view that "a Black P.L.P. government would not know how to run an Independent Bermuda and we will go the way of Jamaica and Haiti." Many of these comments are made without investigation of or reference to these countries' history and present circumstances which would show that those countries were 'poor' under British and French Colonialism which, during post-colonisation or Independence, continue to dominate, dictate and generally exploit these newly Independent countries' economies and natural resources even today.

Whites who do support Independence are both old and young and look forward to an Independent Bermuda being governed by both Black and White Bermudians. They are keenly aware of past injustices against blacks but appear to be motivated more by the idea that 'Bermuda has come of age and has to date advanced it's constitution as far as it can and must now transition to an Independent status inclusive of ALL Bermudians. They appear to have every confidence in the view that Bermudians have the collective abilities to 'run' an Independent Bermuda. Whites who have expressed these views for Independence to the author were in the minority to those who expressed views against. This was the

case, as well, in 1977 as can be seen in the immediate following paragraph.

The Royal Commission appointed to inquire into the 1977 riotous disturbances after the hangings of two Black Beret Cadre members, appreciated these points of view and recommended that Bermuda should be brought to an early Independence (see Elizabeth Davies book, page 10, "The Legal Status of British Dependent Territories"). The Royal Commission opined, in 1977, on the issue of Independence and said:

"This leads us, inexorably, to the discussion of Independence, and to the question of whether those who are presently alienated from the social order would identify themselves more effectively with an Independent Bermuda. We believe that there is sufficient likelihood of this for it to constitute a principal argument for accelerated constitutional change. We recognize that whereas Black Bermudians see Independence as the final step in the process of emancipation, this argument has little appeal to White Bermudians, for they see themselves as already emancipated. We also recognize that there are technical arguments concerning the benefits of Independence with respect to the regulation of civil air transport and merchant shipping, etc. . . . A further point we do stress, however, is that in our view the regulation of the Bermudian economy with respect to immigration, and the planning of social integration, will have to be based upon a shared concept of Bermudian nationhood."

That essentially was the conclusion, paradigm and challenge thrown out to the leaders of the day. That was thirty-seven (37) years ago. It is fair to muse, and perhaps even sadly lament, that that appears to be precisely the same conclusion, paradigm and challenge we as a country face today.

Perhaps, proponents of the so-called two "leading views" need to 'update' these views to ascertain whether or not there has been a 'substantive' change over the last 40 to 50 years. To examine and conclude whether in reality, "the more things change the more they stay as they are."

III THE PROS AND CONS AND ‘TO’S AND FRO’S’ OF INDEPENDENCE:

Twelve years after the above Royal Commission findings, Elizabeth Davies (in her book) stated that in August 1989, a Financial Times Survey described the position in Bermuda as follows:

“There is genuine democracy with free elections and real attempts have been made to achieve racial equality after being one of the LAST (our emphasis) countries to practice segregation right up until the 1960’s. Nevertheless, there are also under-lying racial tensions. The Government claims that Bermuda is one of the best integrated societies in the world. But there is inevitably, an undertone of resentment as the size and influence of the Black population grows ... in an Island still, to a large extent, controlled by a White minority.”

Unhappily, this appears to be a prevailing perception even today.

Elizabeth Davies (on page 14 of her book) when speaking of the PROS of Nationhood, had this to say:

“That concept can only become a reality when Bermuda comes of age and the country takes its rightful place in the international community as a fully independent nation. Only then can Bermuda demonstrate her political maturity to the world at large.”

Ms. Davies reports further that the then P.L.P. leader, Mr. Freddie Wade said that:

“He is also a strong supporter of Independence from Britain. He feels Independence would help to unify the people of Bermuda to face problems together and lessen the tension between Blacks and the White minority, which still existed (then) some 25 years after segregation had officially been abolished.”

However, Ms. Davies noted that, “in the November 1993 elections, neither the U.B.P. nor the P.L.P. put forward Independence as an election policy although this was raised by a candidate who did not win a seat. Race became an issue and Premier Swan has indicated that this will be a top policy issue for this Government.”

Premier Swan, primarily because of his pro-Independence stance and a lack of largely white support from his party, resigned as Premier in 1995 after the defeat of a Referendum on Independence

(now espoused by the U.B.P. Opposition) was boycotted by the then P.L.P. Opposition and opposed by vocal prominent members like Trevor Moniz and John Barritt, of his (Premier Swan) own Government.

Indeed, in 1985 Sir Fred Phillips, in his book entitled, “ West Indian Constitutions: Post-Independence Reform”, illustrated the problem that Sir John Swan had in persuading primarily the white UBP supporters to accept the transition to Independence. He said: *“Although generally speaking, the White population ... are not in favour of a move toward Independence, the party which is representative of White majority (the U.B.P.) is currently led by a young dynamic Black businessman, John Swan ...”*

Generally, those who oppose Independence do so on the arguments that Bermuda is too small, it's dollar will be devalued, the International Companies would leave, Bermuda doesn't have any agricultural and manufactured exports, it is too costly, “its not broke, don't fix it” etc. etc.

Those who champion the cause of Independence, on the other hand, make the case that Bermuda has achieved a high degree of responsible internal self-government constitutionally, and in order to encourage and to accommodate further constitutional advancement, Bermuda must transition to Independence so that it may manage its destiny and affairs, internally and externally, in all of their manifestations.

Proponents for Independence cite Bermuda's strong and robust economy, which in their view, has very little, if anything, to do with political Independence. They go on to say that Bermuda is stable politically and socially and quite adept at handling and negotiating its own external affairs, particularly in matters of marine shipping and civil aviation. Their view is that Bermuda is better poised than many former colonies and dependencies (including the great U.S.A.) on the eve of their transition to Independence and self-determination.

The proponents go on to say that Bermuda in fact, has only to take over the RESERVED POWERS under section 62 of the Bermuda Constitution, which presently are vested in, and administered by, the Governor, namely, external affairs, internal security, the Police and Defence and Bermuda will be Independent. Various Ministers of Government already “share” delegated powers from this enumerated list.

The benefit to Bermuda and Bermudians is that Bermuda will be able to negotiate its own treaties, conventions, agreements, etc. Particularly so, where such matters may conflict with U.K. interests which may not necessarily be in Bermuda's or Bermudians' interests. This benefit is particularly important in matters of favourable civil aviation and shipping routes, etc.

A further benefit would be Bermuda's and Bermudians' right to "frame" their own constitution and choose its own form of Government, national flag, national anthem, etc., these proponents say, which would be an immense source of pride for many who frankly abhor the Union Jack which reminds many Blacks of their colonial subjugation and dependency on the British four (4) thousand miles away. The Queen, it appears, has no obvious relevance in their day to day lives.

Bermudians would represent themselves abroad as consul, ambassadors, High Commissioners, etc. in international organizations such as the U.N. etc., the argument goes. Bermudian children will have a further outlet abroad for their talents and ambitions. Bermudians would have become politically, culturally and internationally more exposed and disposed to other people's cultures, etc.etc.etc.

Those, on the other hand who look at the demerits, rate the "cost" as a detractor to moving to Independence. A study by the U.B.P. Government in 1995 put the full cost of Independence at less than \$2,500,000.00. In today's terms that would be less than \$3 million dollars which proponents argue is negligible for the benefits described above.

Other detractors make the argument that race relations would suffer but give no reason as to why. Proponents ask why would racial tensions increase simply because black and white Bermudians under Independence would have a common goal of making Bermuda prosperous for all? Where are race relations today (as a dependent Territory) in any event? They point to other Independent countries such as U.S.A., Bahamas, Barbados, etc. to see if these countries experienced this phenomenon of deteriorating "race relations".

Yet other detractors speak of the International companies leaving. As indeed they predicted would be the case if the P.L.P. came to power in 1998. It appears, however, that the opposite is true - these companies increased. But why would the International Companies leave if an Independent Bermuda continues to provide

a safe, stable and business-friendly environment socially and politically, PRO-INDEPENDENCE proponents ask? Proponents ask, “What is the evidential basis for these “flight” comments? Business, local or international, will continue to do business as long as there is a “business-friendly” atmosphere, they argue. Many international companies are in Bermuda because they have “flown or left” tax and regulatory unfriendly environments “on-shore”. Jurisdictions, which are in fact quite stable socially, economically and politically. Indeed, some American congressmen and women have been extremely vocal and call some of these companies in Bermuda unpatriotic, corporately inverted “Benedict Arnold” companies, for seeking the tax and regulatory ‘friendly’ environment Bermuda has to offer. Why, proponents ask, would all this change because of Independence? What is the empirical or scientific basis, or statistical correlation, for these comments?

IV CONCLUSION:

The Proponents of Independence argue that there are no tangible reasons for Bermuda not to transition to Independence and those who oppose such a move are fearful of change or simply wish to maintain the STATUS QUO for antiquated reasons. In their view, if the political and constitutional maturity of the Government and the national pride and growth of it’s people are to be the guiding principles, then the PROS far outweigh the CONS on balance. The antagonists or opponents of Independence counter that they don’t want Bermuda to become a “Third World” country or “banana republic”, Bermuda will have no one to come to our military defence and generally we are fine as we are with Britain protecting us, amending our Constitution and preserving the Queen as our Head of State.

It is hoped, even largely anticipated, that at the end of the process, procedures and conclusions of the BIC, all of these queries and misgivings will have been clarified and laid to rest once and for all.