

The West Indies Federation



The West Indies Federation Flag



The West Indies Federation Coat of Arms

Attempts at unification among the British West Indian colonies began in the late 19th century with a Leeward and Windward Island Federation. (1875). Both attempts failed but from the experience it would seem that the consensus was that, there was indeed a need for a British West Indies Federation. Movements to establish the same began in the 20th century.

The Imperial Government was favorable to its formation. Why? She argued that Federation would make it easier for her to control the colonies as a group and that it would definitely ease the financial burden of colonial administration. She proposed Federation in 1945.

In a Circular Dispatch to all the governors of the West Indian colonies on **March 14, 1945**, the then Secretary of State declared that the aim of the British policy should be the development of Federation in the Caribbean, at such time as the balance of opinion in the colonies is in favor of change.

The 1930's riots had clearly demonstrated that the people of the British West Indies were indeed ready for a change. The Trade Unions which emerged for that period also strongly supported Federation. As a collective body, they could see the benefits of such a union. The British Labor Congress demanded Federation with dominion status and that each member state be granted political internal responsible government.

September 1947 at the 2nd Caribbean Labor Congress held in Jamaica

"..... is convinced that the development of West Indian nationhood, the evolution of our social and cultural standards, expressions and stability, our economy ... can

best and most fully be secured by the Federation of the territories concerned. "

From 1945 to 1957 a series of **Conferences** were held to determine the way forward. The first was convened by the British Secretary of State. It was held in Montego Bay. All were present except representatives from British **Honduras and British Guiana**. The leaders present all agreed with the idea of **Federation**, because it was felt that it would be an important step towards achieving self government. They hoped that it would provide a vehicle for achieving political independence of the member states as a group. They could show Britain that they were ready for independence.

They argued that together they could seek common solutions since they shared a common history, culture, and economic structures. They had begun co-operating in other areas such as The Imperial College of Agriculture (1922) and the University of the West Indies (1948).

On February 23, 1956, Queen Elizabeth 3rd, approved the establishment of the West Indian Federation. Two years later in January 1958, the Federation became a reality. Trinidad was elected as the capital. Sir Grantley Adams became the first and only Prime Minister. It had a Senate of nineteen nominated members: two from each of the colony except **Montserrat** which had only one and a House of Representatives of 45 elected members and a Council of Senate presided by the GG- an executive appointed by Britain (Lord Hailes) and ten ministers that would form the Cabinet along with the Prime Minister.



Grantley Adams

Later the House was increased to sixty four members, Jamaica getting thirty six and Trinidad sixteen. This was the result of the two arguing that the House was being controlled by the collective votes of the smaller countries. Further quarrels and disagreements developed that would ultimately lead to the demise of the federation.