

Reasons For the Failure Of The West Indies Federation

Introduction:

The Federation was weak from the beginning. It started out with serious handicaps that would lead to its collapse some four years later. Firstly British Virgin Islands and the two mainland colonies of British Guiana and British Honduras did not join. Bear in mind that they were the largest of the BWI in terms of size. Thus it happened that the next two largest member countries Jamaica and Trinidad came to dominate the Federation.

The Federation had very little fiscal powers. The amount of dues was inadequate. Two million pounds could not successfully finance the operations of the Federation. Jamaica contributed 43% of this amount while Trinidad's share was 39%. Perhaps because of this Jamaica strongly opposed the Federation's appeal for the right to levy direct taxes or custom duties. Jamaica's Alexander Bustamante called the Federation a "federation of paupers".

Even the site of the Federal capital was in dispute. In 1958, Chaguaramas was still leased to the U.S. for a base. The lease was for 99 years. The then Premier, Eric Williams had to argue and fight to get 'permission' to use it! Others felt that the base should be located elsewhere. Many Barbadians felt that the capital should be located in Barbados since the Premier came from that island. But this issue was only a percentage of the internal strife that existed.

The members of the Cabinet were aspiring for national leadership in their own countries and it was felt that they were sidetracked by this. It was a signal that they were more devoted to their own country than to the Federation. This is the reason they argued, that Norman Manley and Eric Williams did not contest the Federal elections of 1958. They were conceived as the chief political figures and negotiator who could give the Federation the kind of leadership and direction it so desperately needed in its embryonic stage. To make matters worst, only an estimated 56.9% of the eligible voters in the ten territories participated in the federal elections. Suspicions began to mount. From the very beginning therefore, the Federation did not have the enthusiastic or overwhelming support of the general public.

There were fears that the larger countries would have to shoulder the burdens and economic responsibilities of the smaller ones. The notion of free movement among the countries also created its own fears that the markets of the larger territories would be flooded with migrants from the 'poorer' countries. Since

Trinidad was the most developed of all the territories 'industrially' she felt she had more to lose.

The event which put a decisive end to the Federation was the referendum held in Jamaica on September 19, 1961, the results of which led to the withdrawal of that island. A state of despondency descended upon the members from the Eastern Caribbean. The future of the Federation now rested upon the shoulders of Trinidad. But on December 4, 1961, the PNM led by Dr. Eric Williams won a landslide victory in the general elections. So, she too withdrew after Eric Williams' now infamous speech of "one from ten leaves zero". Trinidad proceeded forthwith to national independence.

Nevertheless, the Federation was able to **achieve** the following:

1. It provided training in vital areas for example the meteorological service. This is crucial to a region plagued by hurricanes.
2. There was co-op in areas such as research- which led to the effective eradication of endemic tropical diseases throughout the region.
3. Advisory specialists were retained and available on statistics for housing, education, agriculture and fisheries.
4. Small loans were secured for various projects. For example, \$2.5M U.S. was used to encourage small and middle sized businesses.
5. Five technical schools were constructed in the Leeward Islands.
6. Trinidad gave assistance to road building programmes by donating asphalt.