

Our Constitutional History

The Cayman Islands, a Colony of a Colony

During the 1850's, the Cayman Islands experienced a period of isolation and neglect as a dependency and as a result, self-reliance emerged. There were constitutional and administrative uncertainties such as, the relationship between the Cayman Islands and Jamaica, the extent of authority of the Government of Jamaica over the Cayman Islands and the relationship between the Cayman Islands and the Jamaican Courts.

Until 1863, the status of the Cayman Islands was unclear and there was no real decision taken by the United Kingdom to properly establish the islands as a crown colony. However, a clarification of these issues eventually bore fruit with the unwavering determination of Governor Edward Eyre and others.

Between 1863 and 1865, the Cayman Islands was recognised as a full dependency of Jamaica with approval by the Jamaican Assembly. With this, the islands saw the first signs of meaningful constitutional developments which settled many domestic administrative, constitutional and legal issues.

The Act for The Cayman Islands Government was enacted on June 22, 1863. This Act allowed for all British Acts or laws which were valid in Jamaica to be applied to the Cayman Islands. The Act also allowed the Governor of Jamaica to exercise authority over the Cayman Islands as if it were a part of Jamaica and vested the Supreme Court of Jamaica with the jurisdiction to hear any legal action that could not be tried in the islands.

However, for the people of the Cayman Islands, the most significant milestone was that the 1863 Act caused for the full recognition of the local legislature and gave it greater internal independence to handle the islands' domestic affairs. Some of these increased responsibilities included control over the collection, custody and expenditure of the legislative revenue, the establishment, maintenance, discipline and powers of the Police, the management, occupation, removal of public or common land, the abatement of nuisances and the construction of works and public utility to name a few.

Bucking the Trend and Who to Join? 1944-1955

As a result of Jamaica's move to independence, Jamaica obtained a new constitution in 1944 which provided for universal adult suffrage, a limited form of ministerial government and the recognition of political parties. However, the Cayman Islands had no written constitution and no universal adult suffrage.

In 1947, Cayman Assembly representatives, Messrs. Ernest Panton and William Farrington attended the first Federation meeting held in Montego Bay, Jamaica as observers. With the consent of their legislature they proposed that the Cayman Islands would agree to join the Federation, but only if Cayman had direct representation. However, this was rejected by members of the Standing Closer Association Committee of the Federation in 1949 and instead it was recommended that the Cayman Islands should continue as a dependency under the administration of the Governor-General of the Federation.

As the route to Jamaica's independence would not be completed until the 1960's, the Cayman Islands found itself in a peculiar position, because, Jamaica was still able to pass laws that directly affected the Cayman Islands without having to consult Caymanians.

Meanwhile, taking matters into their own hands, on April 7, 1955, six Assemblymen sent a petition to the Colonial Secretary through the Governor of Jamaica. They stated that “while...we look forward to strengthening ties both with Jamaica and with the other territories of the British Caribbean...we wish to restate, as clearly and as strongly as we can, three main aims. First, we wish to retain the right to control entry to our islands. Secondly, we wish to retain our rights to decide what taxes should be imposed upon us. Thirdly, we wish to retain our right to maintain our established channels of trade and employment overseas.”

Premier Michael Manley was content to let the Jamaican Governor resolve the Cayman Islands’ question. Locally, however, there was support on both sides, some wished for obtaining and retaining increased local control over Caymanian interests whilst some factions favoured a break with the United Kingdom and a closer relationship with Jamaica within the framework of the Federation.

The Cayman Islands and the West Indies Federation 1959 to 1962



Photo: Cayman Islands National Archive collection
Justices and Vestrymen in George Town Grand Cayman on June 22, 1911

As the years passed, the Cayman Islands were described simply as “part of” the Federation. However, this issue became more pressing as the Federation States moved closer to achieving full dependency from the Great Britain and transitioned in to dominion status within the British Commonwealth.

In 1959, the Cayman Assembly chose five delegates, Messrs Ducan Merren, Roy McTaggart, Willie Farrington, Ormond Panton and Administrator Jack Rose to participate in a series of conferences held between September 1959 and June 1961. Their instructions were to negotiate and settle all unresolved aspects of the Federation’s Constitution including the Cayman Islands position within it.



Photo: Cayman Islands National Archive collection
Administrator Jack Rose, A.R. Thomas and Sir Hilton Poynton at Lancaster House on a conference on the West Indies Federation.

In July 1961, Governor Kenneth Blackburne visited Grand Cayman for the purpose of announcing the proposals that had been drafted in June that year. The details were presented in a public meeting. The proposal, if accepted, was to be set out in a trial period of about five years after which a review would be carried out by the Federation and the Cayman government to decide whether the islands should continue in an associated relationship or become a unit territory, and petition the Crown to revert it to a colony status.

The proposal for federation membership was that once the Federation became independent, the Cayman Islands would cease to be a British Dependency and would remain a member of the Commonwealth. The islands would enjoy full internal self-government and the Governor of Jamaica

would relinquish the responsibility over the islands.

The areas of Foreign Affairs and Defence would be the responsibility of the Federation and as a result, the Cayman Islands would contribute to their costs. The relationship between Jamaica and the Cayman Islands would be preserved through links with the University of the West Indies, medical and prison services and by the former providing periodic technical support and assistance.

The proposed arrangements meant that the Cayman Islands would have a Lieutenant-Governor as head of state, appointed by the British Government. In addition to this, there would also be a Chief Minister, appointed by the Lieutenant Governor and the Council of Ministers would comprise of the Lieutenant Governor, the Chief Minister, two legislators selected by the Chief Minister and an Attorney General chosen by the Public Service Commission.

It was expected that this proposal would have been the main issue debated in the local 1962 election. However, surprisingly the decision of the Jamaican people upon voting at a referendum to not remain a part of the West Indies Federation caused the eventual collapse of the Federation in May 1962. What did this now mean for the Cayman Islands and its quest for greater self-government?

The First Cayman Islands Constitution 1959 to 1962

In spite of the uncertainties of who the Cayman Islands would join, on July 4, 1959 the Cayman Islands received their first written constitution by royal order-in-council.

Obtaining a written constitution was the first step towards political advancement for the Cayman Islands, as the islands were now specifically exempt from the control of the Jamaican legislature and was placed directly under the authority of the Jamaican Governor.



Photo: Cayman Islands National Archive collection
Opening of The Legislative Assembly in 1972.

There were also radical changes to the Legislature. After 129 years, the body of Vestrymen and Justices was replaced by two new bodies, the Legislative Assembly (the LA) and the Executive Council (ExCo, which is now referred to as the Cabinet). The members of the Legislative Assembly were also reduced from thirty five to eighteen members which included twelve elected members, three nominated members and three official members. ExCo consisted of two official members, two elected members and one nominated member. The Administrator of the Houses sat both as chairman and speaker and was head of ExCo.

The most significant change experienced by the average Caymanian through this new Constitution was that all adult Caymanians were now given the right to vote and stand for election.

However, for women, the road to universal adult suffrage was a bit rocky. In 1948, twenty four George Town women wrote to the Commissioner at the time, stating that there was nothing in the 1865 Act of the Cayman Islands denying women to vote and that they intended to exercise their right in the forthcoming election. Unfortunately, the response of the Attorney General of Jamaica was that whilst the 1865 Act did

not specifically exclude women from exercising their right to vote and their right to stand for election, the Act did not specifically include women either.

In a move to be taken more seriously, on May 29, 1957, Caymanian women came together to demand their political rights. The signatures of three hundred and fifty eight women were submitted in the form of seven identically worded petitions which came from seven different districts to the Legislative Assembly.



Photo: Courtesy of the Cayman Islands National Archive.

Sir Kenneth Blackburne, Governor of Jamaica and the Cayman Islands at a public meeting of the first legislative meeting under the Cayman Islands first written Constitution at George Town Town Hall.

These actions concerned both the Commissioner and Governor so much, that on September 20th 1958, a draft bill was forwarded from the Governor to the Commissioner. The Select Committee unanimously recommended the granting of the petition on October 16th 1958. As a result of this, the Cayman Islands saw the swift passage of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Law on December 8, 1958.

With the new constitution firmly in place and the Federation question having resolved itself, what steps would now be taken to obtain greater self-government as a crown colony of the United Kingdom?

Our Resolution to Remain British!

After the collapse of the West Indies Federation and with Jamaica taking its final steps towards independence, the Cayman Islands had to make a firm decision as to who it would follow, Jamaica or Britain.

The political parties of the day took centre stage in discussing the issue. The National Democratic Party, which was led by Mr. Ormond Panton and Mr. Warren Conolly campaigned for greater self-government above all. Most of the party thought that greater self-government could only be achieved if the Cayman Islands remained with Jamaica.

On the opposite side of the fence, were the leaders of the Christian Democratic Party. Party members such as Ducan Merren, Willie Farrington and Burns Ruddy felt that the Cayman Islands should remain with Britain and thought that the islands' quest for greater self-government could be achieved this way.

This issue received support on both sides and the competition was fierce. The issue became heated and as a result of this Governor Blackburne revisited Grand Cayman on January 17, 1962 to see if a consensus could be reached.

Upon his arrival to the meeting, the MLA members of the Sister Islands, Capt. Keith Tibbetts and Mr. Nolan Foster, presented Governor Blackburne with a petition signed by 345 of the 435 registered voters of Cayman Brac and Little Cayman. The Petition stated that "if Grand Cayman chose to remain with an independent Jamaica, the Sister Islands would seek separate Crown Colony status under Britain".

The issue was finally brought before the feet of the elected members of the Assembly where it was debated and voted upon. To Governor Blackburne's surprise, a unanimous resolution had been reached. It was resolved by the Assembly members that "It was the wish of the Cayman Islands 1. To continue their present association with Her Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom; 2. To negotiate with her Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom for internal self-government taking into account the wishes of the people of the Cayman Islands as to timing."

With the overarching question of who to join, now settled, was the only thing left to negotiate internal self-government for the Cayman Islands with the United Kingdom. Would it be achieved in the next round of constitutional changes?

The 1972 Constitution – A quest for internal self-control?

After the unanimous resolution in the Assembly for the Islands to remain a dependency of the United Kingdom, the legislature now attempted to fulfil its mandate to achieve internal self-government.

During the 1960's the local legislature established select committees to consider constitutional change. A British constitutional expert, the Earl of Oxford and Asquith was also appointed by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to facilitate this process.

In conducting his work, the Earl of Oxford observed that the islanders desired greater participation by the elected representatives in government business and for the abolition of nominated members in both the Legislative Assembly and Executive Council.

After the Earl produced his report, a new constitution came into force in the Cayman Islands in August 22, 1972. Some of the changes that resulted from this new constitution were that the Administrator, who was the Chief Executive, was now changed to the Governor. The term of the Legislative Assembly was extended from three to four years and the system of nominated members was abolished. In its place was the appointment of the Chief Secretary, the Financial Secretary and the Attorney General who were official members.

The new constitution also made provision for the Legislative Assembly to be presided over by a Speaker. The appointment of a speaker did not take place until 1989 some 17 years after the 1972 constitution came into force with Ms. Sybil McLaughlin appointed as the first speaker of the Legislative Assembly.

The Governor remained as the Chief Executive of the Executive Council and the four elected members were officially assigned portfolios by the Governor pursuant to the 1972 constitution.

Whilst substantial constitutional developments were achieved through the 1972 Constitution, the longstanding request of the people of the Cayman Islands for greater participation by the elected membership seemed to remain elusive.

This was evidenced by the fact, that although the Executive Council were bound by "collective responsibility" to support all its decisions in the Assembly, the Governor was vested with special responsibilities and reserved powers which excluded him from being bound by the collective will.

The new Constitution vested the Governor with special responsibilities which did not require him to consult with elected members. Additionally, the Governor was vested with reserved powers which allowed him to go against the advice of Executive Council in special circumstances.

Whilst, the Cayman Islands have been fortunate that it has had benevolent Governors who have used their reserved powers sparingly, we see that the tension between the Governor and the elected representatives still remain. Here we are, some thirty five years after the fact, making the same request – Have the winds of change finally arrived?

– taken from the Constitutional Modernisation Website (last updated 27 September 2007).

http://www.constitution.gov.ky/portal/page?_pageid=1568,2185448&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL