

Canada and the Turks & Caicos Islands

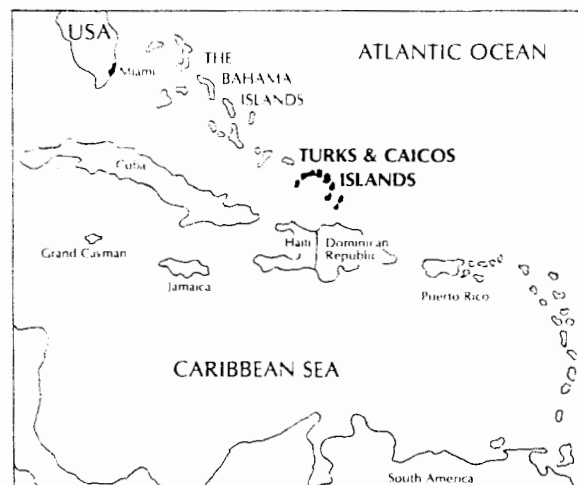
Ian A. Stuart

Few Canadian parliamentarians remain unaware of the much-discussed issue of Canada forming some type of Association with the Turks & Caicos Islands, a British Crown Colony immediately south of the Bahamas, composed of some 40 islands and cays. On March 3, 1988, the people of the Islands went to the polls and gave an overwhelming majority to a new Government. The People's Democratic Movement (PDM) under the Honourable Oswald O. Skippings, former Leader of the Opposition, won 11 of the 13 voting districts, sweeping all the Islands except South Caicos, a traditional stronghold of the Progressive National Party (PNP) who formed the previous Government.

The new Government, under Mr. Skippings, stated that one of its first priorities will be a close examination of the relationship between Canada and the Turks & Caicos Islands, and, provided Britain agrees, within the next few months, major steps towards forming some type of Association between the two countries is a very real possibility. In the meantime, Canadians continue flowing into the Islands in record numbers, buying property, building retirement homes, establishing businesses and making investments. The economy of the Turks & Caicos clearly is benefitting even from the idea of the proposed partnership.

Christopher Columbus first discovered the Turks and Caicos archipelago in 1492. In fact the well-substantiated "Link" theory pinpoints the capital island of Grand Turk as the explorer's first landfall in the New World, regardless of the claim by National Geographic that the site was Samana Cay in the Bahamas. Re-discovered by Ponce De Leon on an expedition from Puerto Rico, the islands remained uninhabited until Britain, France and Spain fought over them in the battle between the great European powers for the riches of the West Indies. They finally wound up in British hands, and have remained a British possession ever since.

For hundreds of years, the Turks & Caicos were the principal Salt Islands. The once-dubbed "white gold" was





Government buildings, Grand Turk

produced by solar evaporation in vast *salinas* by generations of back-breaking labour. But this industry collapsed in the mid-sixties, forcing the Islands to follow the rest of the Caribbean and reorient themselves to a future in tourism, the building of winter homes and retirement communities for affluent North Americans, the modernization and expansion of the fishing industry (with special reference to mariculture) and the development of an offshore financial centre based on a tax-free economy.

The idea of union with this second largest cluster of islands in the Western Hemisphere was first suggested by Canadian Prime Minister Borden in 1917, but not until the 1970s did it receive serious attention when – at the urging of Islanders – Max Saltzman, an NDP Member of Parliament, initiated a debate in the House of Commons through a Private Member's Bill. Although the Government of the day rejected the concept, it has remained an issue of perennial popularity.

When Mr. Saltzman died, the torch was passed to Conservative MP Dan McKenzie (Winnipeg-Assiniboine), and in April 1986, the next generation of Islanders joined with him to make it a major issue in Canada once again. Ralph Higgs and Dalton Jones arrived in Ottawa as a two-man contingent from the Turks & Caicos Development

Organization, a group of private citizens drawn from a wide cross section of the Turks & Caicos community, their primary goal being to "forge a link with Canada". They had commissioned an independent survey (the first ever taken in the Islands) and discovered that over 90% of the people indeed favoured some kind of Association with Canada. Higgs and Jones addressed the Progressive Conservative Caucus Sub-Committee on External Affairs chaired by David Daubney, MP (Ottawa West), and their visit received national television and print media coverage, underlining the popular appeal the concept seems to generate in Canada.

There was a substantial wait for the results of the "Daubney Report", which concluded that it would be inappropriate for Canada to unilaterally institute formal talks with the Turks & Caicos when an election was imminent in the Islands, and Canada could not be seen to be interfering in the internal, free democratic process in another country. But the Committee did suggest that Canada should enter into talks with the newly elected Turks & Caicos Government (a ministerial system somewhat similar to Canada's) after the elections provided the new Government asked for such talks and the permission of the British Government was given. The Committee also made two additional recommendations. The

first was that Canada should increase its foreign aid to the Turks & Caicos, given the extraordinary degree of good will involved, and that the Canadian private sector should consider investing in the Islands.

These two recommendations were major steps forward and Mr. Higgs' returned to Canada in October 1987 and joined with Mr. McKenzie and other interested Canadians to form the Turks & Caicos Development Organization of Canada, a non-profit organization that allows Canadians to become directly involved in the process of bringing the two Commonwealth neighbours together. With donations from Cabinet Ministers, Members of Parliament and private citizens, the Organization became active in November 1987, and now has hundreds of members from across Canada, including all ten provinces, both territories, and even the United Kingdom and the United States.

The concept of union with Canada is one that fires the popular imagination in Canada and offers none to Islanders seeking a better future. There are several forms the relationship might take. It might be economic, political or both. It might be a tri-partite arrangement with the United Kingdom. It might mean entry into the Canadian Confederation as the 11th province or the third territory. It might be based on relationships such as those between New Zealand and the Cook Islands, Australia and the Cocos Islands, or the United States and some of its Trust Territories in the Pacific. It might, instead, mimic the relationship France has with Monaco or Martinique, or that between the Netherland Antilles and the Netherlands. Perhaps Commonwealth status might be chosen, such as the plan selected by the people of Puerto Rico in their deal with the United States. Whatever form the relationship takes, Mr. Higgs and his sister organizations feel that it should not be pre determined. "We have never tried to second-guess the politicians as to what form of Association should be negotiated, even if we might prefer that of Associated States" he says.

"Our role is to bring the two Governments to the table, make sure all the options are on that table, and leave them to negotiate the deal they believe is in the best interests of the Islanders and Canadians alike."

There are clear advantages for both countries in the proposed Association. As long as Canada is a northern nation faced with an oppressive winter there will always be the need for a psychological and physiological "break" in the winter months for an escape "into the Sun". In almost all cases, Canadians must convert their currency at a substantial loss

when taking that winter vacation. Considering that some 474,000 Canadians annually go to the Caribbean and spend about 30 million dollars in the process, the loss to Canadians and the Canadian economy is enormous. Association with these Islands would give Canadian vacationers a "home away from home" in the near-Caribbean (closer to Ottawa than Calgary) where their currency would be accepted at par. Canadians would also acquire a retirement haven in the sun for those who would rather live in the Islands than on the U.S. mainland. Association with the Turks & Caicos would provide a sense of security and stability for Canadian investors. They would quickly develop new hotels, inns, villas, condominiums and retirement communities in the Islands. Canadian money would go into Canadian banks and back into the Canadian economy. Yet another advantage would be the dramatic increase in Canadian export sales. The Islands currently import about 27 million dollars a year, and over 20 million of that goes to the United States market. Canadian suppliers sell the Turks & Caicos a paltry \$30,000 a year. With Association, almost all food stuffs, consumer goods and building materials would come from Canada, and, as the economy grows, this figure would escalate.

The Islands have a strategic position in a marketplace of many millions of people. The Turks & Caicos would become not only a sales centre for Canadian business people supplying products to the Caribbean, but an excellent trans shipment point for Canadian goods sent into the area.

The Turks & Caicos are at that stage of development where they offer Canadian entrepreneurs innumerable opportunities in a wide range of businesses yet to be introduced to the economy. While tourism, construction and fishing are currently the big industries, a whole array of support businesses and services are needed to supply the existing population (currently 14,000) and a steadily expanding number of tourists (currently 40,000). It is significant that the largest hotel development on the Islands other than the recently built "Club Med" is a Canadian Sheraton project financed by Canadians.

You cannot go to the Turks & Caicos without bumping into a Canadian, and it is reasonable to assume – given the special interest in these Islands by Canadians – that they will soon be the largest expatriate group in the Turks & Caicos. "Every Turks & Caicos Islander knows a Canadian" is a common saying in the Islands. Perhaps the problem is that every Canadian does not know a Turks & Caicos Islander.

The Islands would benefit from Association as well. They would reach self-sufficiency almost immediately and have no further need of a British Grant-in-Aid. The increased development would allow them to quickly rise to the level of their more developed Caribbean neighbours. Association would offer expanded educational opportunities and a higher standard of living for the people. With the direct import of Canadian goods, the cost of living would go down (they now

have to buy in Miami at U.S. dollar rates) and exports would increase as Canada becomes their largest and best market for seafood and future agricultural products coming from a place which has perpetual sunshine. Canadian investment and expertise can take advantage of the fact that these Islands are the best location for mariculture in the entire Caribbean, (according to the Mariculture Institute of the Smithsonian Institution) and Canadians become actively involved in "farming" the sea. The current economy lacks light manufacturing, assembly and processing industries. With Canadian initiative and capital flowing into the Islands, these are beginning to follow, creating a large number of potential jobs for Islanders.

Private business would thrive as Islanders have access to Canadians looking for local business partners, and are able to start their own businesses. Canadians retiring to the Islands would bring professional and technical skills that can be passed along to the next generation of Islanders.

Of course any grand project such as Association is not without its problems and drawbacks. But these should be seen as merely challenges to be overcome. If the political will exists on both sides, and the United Kingdom agrees, there is no reason why the two parties cannot have a unique, historical Association enacted into law by 1990. If they do, it will open up a whole new window on the future for both nations.



Canada and the Turks and Caicos



Results of questionnaire to constituents by Sinclair Stevens, M.P.

1. Americans have access to islands in the sun with Hawaii and Puerto Rico. Great Britain has the British Virgin Islands, Antigua and other islands in the area. France has Guadeloupe and Martinique. Do you think Canada should have access to islands in the sun?

Yes: 882 No: 61 No opinion: 12

2. If Canada formed an association with the Turks and Caicos, would you vacation there?

Yes: 849 No: 70 No opinion: 36

3. Some people feel that for Canada to form an association with the Turks and Caicos would be a return to colonialism. Do you agree?

Yes: 46 No: 808 No opinion: 101

4. Should Canada continue discussions with the Turks and Caicos government regarding association?

Yes: 879 No: 73 No opinion: 3

Editor's Note: While not a scientific survey the results of this questionnaire may be useful to other parliamentarians who wish to canvass their electorate about the idea. It may also stimulate professional polling organizations to undertake more systematic sample surveys.