

PROTECTING THE LEGACY OF SOCIAL MOBILITY

by Fred Mitchell MP

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When I was a high school student in 1969, there was no more burning topic than Independence. It consumed our generation. Could The Bahamas survive as an independent country? That was the question of the day. Instinctively, we believed that the answer was yes. Time has shown that we were right. Back then, Britain and the British Queen had become increasingly irrelevant and so what in fact was the big deal? It was a big deal, though, for many people. It caused psychological trauma for many who just could not consider life without the Queen.

I never spoke to him about this but I think that to make the whole idea of Independence easier, Prime Minister Lynden Pindling and his colleagues decided to stay with the monarchy and the system that we still have today, where an irrelevant Queen in Britain is the Head of State of The Bahamas. The message was: "Don't worry too much; the Queen will still be here." Thirty seven years later, even though the irrelevancy of the monarchy is more stark, no one seems willing to touch the subject with a barge pole. There are obviously other priorities,

And yet for me, it is the burning ambition which I have for my generation: to make this country a republic. Increasingly, I think not in my lifetime.

Be that all as it may, the question at this 37th year for me is what is the burning ambition of those today who are the age I was back in 1969? I turned 17 that year. What thoughts do the 17 year olds have in their heads about where The Bahamas should be? Most times, what I get from people that age is: "Can you get me a job?" Nothing about ideology, history or philosophy or their own sense of themselves in the world. When pressed, the message gets no clearer: what do you want to do? "Anything" is the reply. Unfortunately, 'anything' is not a job.

We as a political class then can in the face of this kind of dull response become cynical about it all. If you are FNM, you simply get the money and buy the votes you need. If you are PLP, you still think that you have to win hearts and minds. You have to teach the man to fish rather than dole out fish

all the time.

So 37 years after standing on Clifford Park with my mentors Cyril Stevenson LVO and Eric Wilmott BEM now sadly dead, there are no pictures of me on that date. But I have my memories. And I know what I felt: I just could not believe it. It was done. The Brits were gone and we were in charge. What now? Prince Charles, the man who came to give us our independence, told me a few years back that what he remembered about that day was the canopy falling down in the middle of the daytime ceremony and how funny the new Governor General's wife Lady Paul looked with her hat having been knocked askew.

Winston Saunders, also now dead, remembered about Prince Charles, how the entire first run of programmes for the ceremony had be scrapped to the public dump because Charles, Prince of Wales (one of the countries of the United Kingdom) was described as the Prince of Whales (the great big mammal in the sea).

Today, in retrospect I look back to that age as one of great ambitions and possibilities. Sir Lynden Pindling and his colleagues led in an age where it was possible for Franklyn Wilson, now Arawak Homes Chair, fresh out of college and a Chartered Accountant, and not half a generation from his experience of sleeping on the floor as a child in Ross Corner, could rise to be a partner in an accounting firm, and today a generation later, a stone cannot be thrown from his house in the Eastern Road to hit Ross Corner. Mr. Wilson says that he had to sleep on the floor because there was no bed for him until his older sister got married and moved out. Such were the possibilities and the potential was fulfilled. That is the story of Bahamian Independence for me. The social mobility which allowed people of poor beginnings to rise up to be at the commanding heights of the economy.

If that story can still be told about other Bahamians in their numbers when I am no longer on the scene, I will have done my job to protect the independence that I was so excited about on the playing fields of St. Augustine's a generation ago.

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