



The World Today

Sir John Compton And Caribbean Integration: Part 1

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The death of Sir John Compton takes from active regional politics the last of that original set of political leaders who had a strong commitment to the concept of regional integration through West Indian federation; and who, with the failure of the Federation initiative, sought the “second best option” of regional economic integration through CARIFTA/CARICOM.

Compton came into office in 1964; a few years after the Federation had foundered, though, as Minister of Trade and Production, he was intimately involved in discussions in his country on federation, and had initially, an early politically intimate relationship with Eric Williams. He was one of those committed to Williams’ “Economics of West Indian Nationhood”, stressing the importance of a so-called “tight” rather than “loose” federal formula.

When he came into office as Chief Minister in 1964, talks had been going on towards the creation of an Eastern Caribbean federal state, among the Windward and Leeward Islands and Barbados – the so-called “Little Eight” remnant of countries leftover from the demise of the West Indies Federation. Compton disagreed with the approach proposed, and being negotiated, by Errol Barrow, then Premier of Barbados.

The bitter taste left by the disagreement initiated the independence of Barbados under Barrow, and a turn to finding some form of political collaboration among the even smaller remnant of the Windward and Leeward Islands. Arthur Lewis, disappointed at the failure of the “Little Eight”, took the view that Compton’s enthusiasm as a new leader with new ideas about protecting his own country in the proposed Federation, failed to appreciate the effort that had gone on before, and the implications of re-opening settled questions.

But the controversy between Barrow and Compton reflected, in retrospect, a muted competition between their two countries led by two highly articulate and ambitious politicians, which simmered as the years went by. This was particularly so as St Lucia under Compton’s long leadership (1964-79) showed increasingly positive signs of the

economic growth and incipient industrialization which had earlier characterised the Barbadian economy.

With the failure of the Little Eight idea, Compton set his mind to discerning how some form of collaboration between the Windwards and Leewards could be arranged, especially as thoughts in the islands began to turn towards the possibility of single-island independence. Along the way, he eschewed initiatives from Guyana and others for another try at political union, accepting the view espoused in St Lucia business circles at the time that there could be no union between “sharks and sardines”. But he fervently held on to the idea Caribbean economic integration and Caribbean functional cooperation, elaborated initially by Guyana, Barbados and Antigua-Barbuda, and encouraged his colleagues to participate in CARIFTA and then CARICOM.

The basis of these latter initiatives was an internal division among the participating states that recognized that there were “more” and “lesser” developed countries within the Region, and that a certain protection should be granted to the lesser developed (the Windwards and Leewards) in terms of reduction of tariffs, the development of their industrialization and the grant of special economic assistance to facilitate their development. This is, of course, the original basis of what today, in World Trade Organisation, and other international economic relations circles, is referred to as the need for “special and differential treatment” for the small countries of the world.

Sir John Compton was also, the last of the West Indian leaders who had a grounding in the philosophy of social democracy or democratic socialism. This had been gained from affiliations with the British Labour Party, the British socialist movement, and the early linking of the Caribbean trades union movement with the British trades union movement – Norman and Michael Manley, Adams, Barrow, Burnham, Vere Bird of Antigua, Bradshaw of St Kitts, George Charles of St Lucia and others.

The period of Federation had encouraged these leaders to formally ally to fight in the 1958 Federal Elections, and form the Government of the Federation. But with Compton’s departure from the St Lucia Labour Party, his links with those union-party alliances ceased, as did any connection that he had with the International Socialist and Labour organizations. He represented, on his own, so to speak, the vigorous farmers’ movement that developed with the demise of sugar as an export crop in St Lucia, and like Eric Williams in Trinidad developed informal alliances with the elements of the trades union movement in the country as a base for electoral support.

But even with the Cold War in full swing, this division between socialist and others in the Caribbean never gained the salience, as a divisive element, which it might have had in other regions, to the extent that it might affect cooperation in the new era of CARICOM integration. The British decision, initiated in 1961, and consolidated a decade later, to join the European Community was a wake up call to Caribbean leaders to strengthen the

CARICOM as an effective, unified system of representation and negotiation in the international economic arena.

Compton became insistent that this should be a significant mode of CARICOM cooperation and integration, fully supporting the decision of CARICOM to negotiate as a unit with the African and Pacific Countries towards what became the Lome Convention of 1975. This process also convinced him of the necessity to ensure collective OECS ambassadorial representation in London, and then Brussels – an initiative pursued not without difficulty in the new era of single-island independence.

This orientation led him to initiate, with others, the transformation of the minimal process of collaboration among the Windwards and Leewards into a more structured system, subsequently initiated as the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS); though at the actual point of its establishment, Compton had lost office to the St Lucia Labour Party (1979-82). With his return to office in mid-1982, and faced with the implications for the Windward Islands banana industry of the European Community's decision to establish itself as a Single Market and Economy, Compton became more convinced of the necessity for the OECS to evolve into something approximating what came to be called "political union". This became standing OECS policy after a formal proposal by Prime Minister James Mitchell in 1987. But again, the initiative succumbed to unwillingness of mainly the Leewards to go the course required.

Certain wariness seemed to affect Compton after the gradual, but persistent slow-down of the OECS Political Unity Initiative. But facing another implication of the European Single Market and Economy, Compton turned his mind to the consequences for Caribbean integration as a whole, and in particular the fate of the OECS, of Europe's response to the changing international economic relations of the post-Cold War period – the period of globalization. This focus occupied him strongly from the end of the 1980's to mid-1997, when he left office as Prime Minister of St Lucia.

This is Part One of a two part series.