



# Forgotten Dreams: A People's desire to chart their own course in Abaco, Bahamas

## Part Two

A Nassau Institute Publication

By Rick Lowe

Edited by Larry Smith

October 12, 2010



# Forgotten Dreams: A people's desire to chart their own course in Abaco, Bahamas

## Preface:

This brief essay is the second of two parts. Part One is based on the factual accounts available through the local press, the Internet and personal stories of some of the participants as published in books and journals. Part Two focuses on what might have been, had the people of Abaco won the right to pursue their dreams.

## Introduction

The movement for a free Abaco did not die with Bahamian independence. Some activists continued to seek autonomy for the island. They included Chuck Hall and Bert Williams who, in August 1973, formed a political party called the Abaco Independence Movement. Its stated goal was self-determination within a federal Bahamas.



Just before independence, Hall had been in touch with an American financier named Michael Oliver, whose libertarian Phoenix Foundation had attempted to create a micro-nation in 1971 on some low-lying Pacific atolls. This so-called Republic of Minerva was to have "no taxation, welfare, subsidies, or any form of economic interventionism". It reflected what was to be suggested for Abaco.

Oliver, a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, had written a libertarian manifesto in 1968, *A New Constitution For A New Country*, (<http://amzn.to/cZUIqd>) that supported property rights and an unrestricted market as the basis for human liberty, with a minimalist role for the state.

He agreed to help finance AIM in order to set up a libertarian refuge on Abaco. This

### THE ABACO INDEPENDENT Issue No. 1      FREEDOM • ORDER • PROGRESS

#### Abaco Party Formed

A new party has been formed to represent the people of Abaco, and to seek home-rule and self-determination. The ABACO INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT (AIM) is organizing councils in all Abaco settlements, and is preparing for a public meeting on Sat., Oct. 20 in Marsh Harbour. (See notice.)

AIM's first convention will be on the following Saturday, October 27, also in Marsh Harbour, with delegates attending from each council.

AIM's basic philosophy is: "The purpose of government is to protect the freedom of the individual from force and

fraud. Government should be the servant, not the master, of the people."

AIM will press to establish an Abaco government elected by Abacoites, and with each settlement electing its own council to oversee its own internal affairs.

AIM will seek change through constitutional means and other methods recognized in international law. Petitions, home-rule bills, constitutional amendments, and referendums will all be used.

#### Watkins: A Frightened Man?

Erington Watkins has recently been attempting to convince Abacoites that joining an independence movement is treason and will be severely punished by the PLP government in Nassau.

Watkins may only be trying to frighten the people into supporting his new alliance with the Labor Party. (There are no labor unions on Abaco, and the constituency was not consulted on his change of affiliation.)

But Watkins may also be truly frightened, and may indeed have received threats of reprisals against those seeking freedom for Abaco. If this is so, may we point out that frightened men are the worst of men: they are used to their confide, and denigrate the citizens who would otherwise work to protect their liberties.

To join ANY political party seeking ANY ends through peaceful means is not yet illegal in the Bahamas. We still have a constitution to protect political freedoms: we will recognize

the British common law, we still have free courts and the right to appeal points of law to the Queen's Privy Council. These facts may be changed in the future by an unjust government, but for now we are protected by law.

Those seeking independence elsewhere in the Commonwealth have not been put to jail for organizing such movements using lawful means. Mr. Prindley and his followers were not put to jail for seeking independence for the Bahamas.

The Abaco Independence Movement seeks self-determination through legal and peaceful political action.

If the PLP government intends to destroy freedom of speech, press, assembly, and the other personal and political freedoms which are the birthright of all Abacoites, let us find out now. Let us not be frightened into silence by political intriguers. LET THESE BAHAMIANSHIRE LOVE AND CHERISH THEIR FREEDOM STAND UP NOW!

#### PLP May Split

Raines ahead in Nassau and Forester that the PLP convention to be held this week in Grand Bahama will result in a major rift in Prindley's government, forcing an early election.

The moderate wing of the PLP has been pressing resolutions and urging no public expression to the current government. At least one former member of the FSM in the Assembly has declared himself in alliance with Labor. A realignment bringing many PLP Assembly members into Labor could spell the end of Prindley's reign. But Abacoites should take little

comfort in this. While Prindley may be a self-serving politician, Labor governments are notorious for their destruction of economic progress and personal freedoms, and for their sympathy for communist governments.

The success of the FSM has begun preparing for the expected early campaign, through public speeches, literature, and heavy press support. Abacoites, whose aspirations have been ignored and rejected by both the PLP and FSM, should begin now to develop an Independent Movement.

campaign for "self-determination through legal and peaceful political action" was launched in the inaugural edition of AIM's newsletter - the Abaco Independent - on October 18 1973.



### No more Crown Land

One of the movement's key proposals was the placement of all 300,000 acres of Crown land on Abaco in a land trust drawn up by "internationally respected economists". At the time, Abaco's Crown land was said to be valued at \$60 million. In addition to home lots, citizens were to receive shares in the trust, whose income would be derived from land leases and sales.

In addition to this revenue, "a free economic climate will attract businesses, providing high-paying jobs," AIM said. The plan called for a balance between nature preserves, recreational, farming, commercial and industrial areas, as well as traditional real estate developments.

To avoid "the threat of land expropriation" the trust was to provide a registered voter share issue that could not be transferred to non-Abaconians. And each Abaconian would receive a land entitlement deed for one-acre home lots.



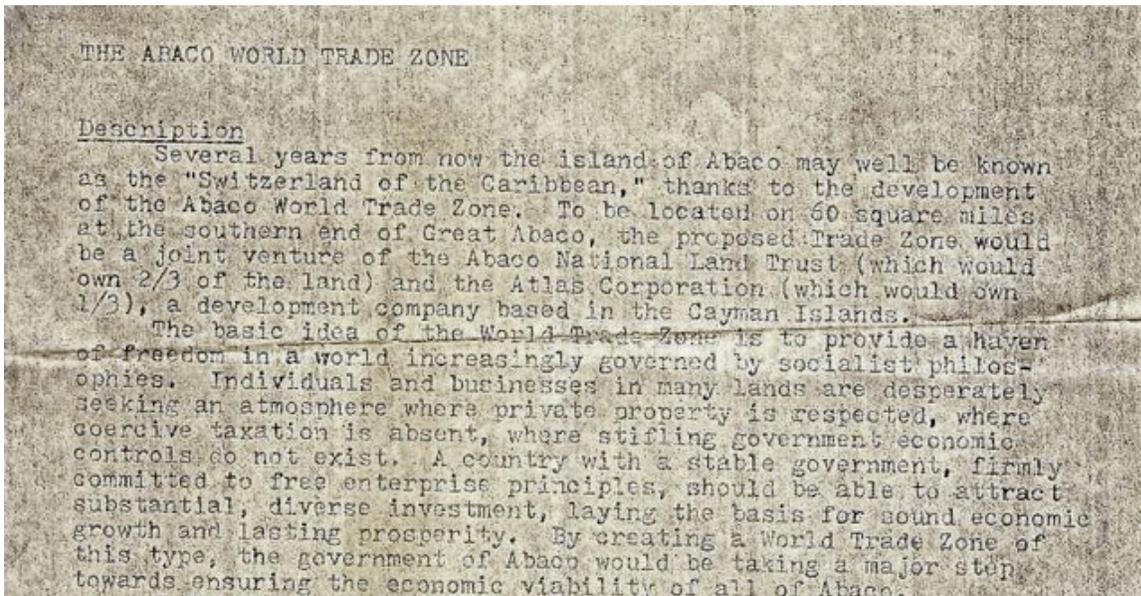
Estimates at the time suggested that by leasing 137,000 acres of the 300,000 acres of Crown Land to developers, the yearly income could have amounted to \$55 million.

### Free Trade Zone

An Abaco World Trade Zone was also proposed as a joint venture between the land trust and the Atlas Corporation, a development company based in the Cayman Islands that was supported by wealthy libertarians. A four-page outline of this 60-square-mile free trade zone was published. Two thirds of the zone would be owned by the land trust, and one third by the Atlas Corporation.

In late 1973, AIM surveyed 200 Abaco residents and reported strong dissatisfaction with high taxes and poor service from the central government in

Nassau, together with an almost unanimous demand for more local control. These opinions still resonate today.



On February 23 1974 AIM held its first convention. A key speaker was Dr. John Hospers, of the University of Southern California. He was the author of *Libertarianism: A Political Philosophy Whose Time Has Come* (<http://bit.ly/cOZQwF>). He was also the first Libertarian Party presidential candidate in the United States.



Left to Right: Dr. Hospers & Richmond Bostwick speakers at the AIM Convention

On May 10 1974 the Abaco Development Bureau (headed by Hall), the economic arm of AIM, held a conference in Marsh Harbour whose participants included a dozen American investors. This time Hospers was barred from entering the country by Bahamas Immigration.

### Beginning of the end?

At about the same time, reports surfaced of a mysterious group called the 20th Century Revolutionaries, which appeared to threaten the overthrow of the central government on Abaco. AIM said this group was diametrically op-

posed to its philosophy of individual liberty, limited government and peaceful political action.

According to a February 1975 article in Esquire magazine, plans were being drawn up for an alleged insurrection in Abaco. The article by Andrew St. George titled, *The Amazing New-Country Caper*, centred on an interview with Mitchell WerBell, an American mercenary and arms dealer, who claimed that Abaco was set to declare unilateral independence on January 1, 1975.

WerBell had helped plan an abortive invasion of Haiti by Cuban and Haitian exiles in 1966 called Project Nassau. And according to the Esquire article, AIM was being "financed and managed from WerBell's headquarters in Powder Springs, a suburb of Atlanta".

But some of those associated with AIM have said that WerBell was a peripheral figure at best, and wondered at the logic of disclosing to the press in advance the date of a supposed armed takeover of Abaco. However, there was wild speculation at the time among political leaders in Nassau, as evidenced in the biography of Sir Lynden Pindling by Michael Craton.

It is clear that the Bahamian prime minister saw the Abaco independence movement as a serious national issue. In June 1974, Lord Bellhaven (who had supported the Council for a Free Abaco during the British debates on Bahamian independence) asked questions in the UK parliament about the Bahamian government's "harassment" of Abaconians seeking home rule.

And much was made at the time of a dynamite explosion during a political meeting in Marsh Harbour where the prime minister was speaking. No-one was injured in this incident, and the prevailing view among Abaconians is that there was never any intention to harm the prime minister.

According to one local source involved with AIM, a handful of Abaconians also visited WerBell's Georgia estate, but no serious evidence of an armed takeover ever came to light and no arrests or charges were ever laid against any of the alleged participants.

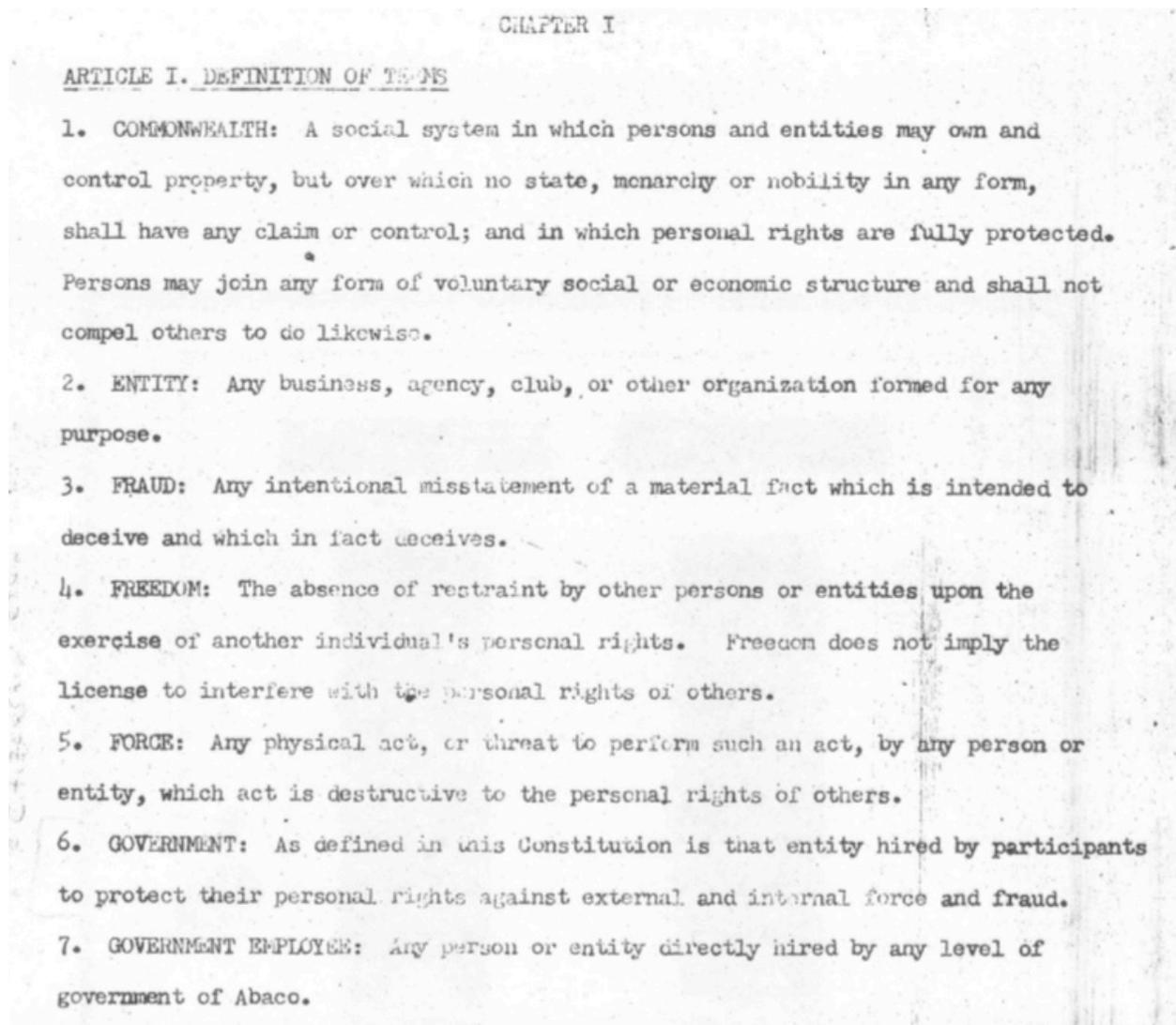


Nevertheless, rumours of such a plot led AIM to change its name in March 1975 to the Abaco Home Rule Movement, and plans were made to contest Abaco seats in the 1977 general election. The newly styled organisation denied any association with WerBell, and disclaimed any military objectives.

### Constitution of Limited Government

The AHRM continued to work on a draft constitution for a proposed Abaco Commonwealth. This document, based on Libertarian principles, called for a limited government controlled by elected representatives from each settlement. A bi-cameral legislature would be responsible for:

- Establishing laws and procedures to protect citizens from force and fraud;
- Raising revenues, setting a budget and supervising government expenditures;



- Organizing and maintaining a peace-keeping force and judicial system;
- Acting as a permanent agency for the review of actions by government officials.

Abaco's assembly would have the power to suspend or remove from office any official suspected of infringing on individual rights, and most laws would be set to expire after five years, forcing parliament to review the costs and benefits of each initiative it passed.

One of the most unconventional provisions of the proposed constitution was the way in which government activities would be funded. Persons wishing to participate in government services would make voluntary premium payments. And official powers and duties would be restricted largely to peace-keeping, registration and recording of legal documents; and adjudication of disputes concerning contracts, ownership, property and other personal rights.

In the July 1977 general election Pindling's Progressive Liberal Party won 30 of the 38 seats in the national parliament, including North Abaco. Even though the South Abaco seat was won by Michael Lightbourne of the opposition Bahamian Democratic Party - with the backing of the Abaco Home Rule Movement - the results were a major disappointment for those seeking home rule. Momentum was lost as a result, and the movement eventually died.

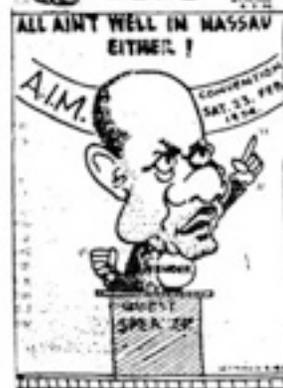
In a 2003 Tribune interview, Jack Albury, a community leader in Marsh Harbour who had supported home rule, acknowledged the success of the Pindling government in "keeping the peace during difficult and stressful times" . But he remained disappointed that Abaco had missed a marvelous opportunity to achieve self-determination.

### What if?

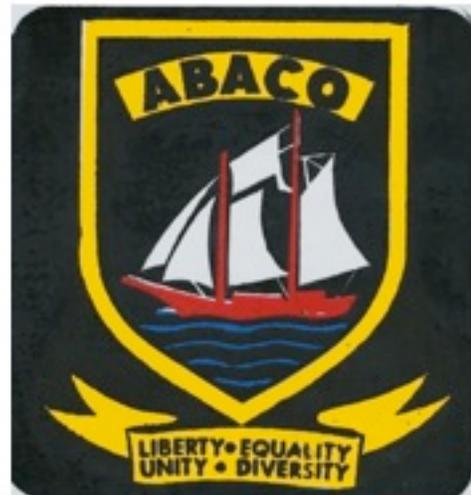
If Abaco had remained British, he argued, it could have become "another Switzerland, the financial mecca of the western world. Its hard-working people, its sense of mission, and the stability ensured by British protection would have propelled the island to new heights."

With every Abaconian owning the land of their birth, a free trade zone unencumbered by political control from Nassau, limited government and economic freedom for all, it is certainly interesting to speculate on how different history could have been had Abaco been allowed to chart its own course.

Miscellany...



Editorial Cartoons from the period



Proposed Coat of Arms



Left to Right: Charles Sawyer, Captain Sherwin Archer and Dr. Cottman



Chuck Hall and Richard King at Libertarian Party Convention in the US soliciting support