

Grenada's Road to Independence

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On February 7, 1974 Grenada became the smallest state in the western hemisphere when it achieved its independence from the United Kingdom after over two centuries of British rule and colonialism. Under darkness, due to the absence of electricity as a result of a labour stoppage that had shut down the islands' economy, including its electricity supply, Grenada bade farewell the its status as a British colony and joined the ranks of sovereign nations. Unlike Jamaica, Trinidad and Barbados which had all achieved independence without much struggle, Grenada experienced months of intense struggle and civil unrest before it was able to hoist its red, gold and green nutmeg-emblazoned flag over the slave-built bastions of its 300 year-old Fort George. The man of the hour was the islands' new Prime Minister Eric Matthew Gairy who had championed independence for Grenada for over a decade now, finally realizing his dream for Grenada.

Though the efforts of individuals like William Galway Donovan and TA Marryshow had advanced the cause of Grenada's poor, both men, and especially Marryshow, had been unable to make the cause of the majority of Grenada's population the center of social change in their eras. Much remained to be done, and it would take the efforts of a newcomer to politics in the 1950s who would transform the working class in Grenada.

The struggle for Grenada's independence can be traced directly back to the 1950s and the return of Eric Gairy from Aruba and his establishment of the Grenada Manual and Mental Workers' Union (later the Grenada Manual, Maritime and Intellectual Workers Union) to advocate for the rights of the working class – the urban poor and agricultural workers – most of whom lived in very poor conditions on the estates and had been without a political voice since the end of slavery. Eric Gairy became that voice and for the first time in the history of Grenada the status quo was seriously threatened by mass political activism in the form of protest that erupted in 1951.

Agricultural workers, under the leadership of Eric Gairy and the GMMWU, staged several labour stoppages in early January 1951 to demand higher wages and better working conditions. To quell the growing civil unrest caused by the protests, the leaders of the GMMWU were arrested and brought to Carriacou. Unfortunately, the action only ignited the already volatile situation, and the

protesting workers demanded the release of Eric Gairy, and went on a rampage burning buildings and looting estates. The raging and uncontrollable fires so illuminated the night that the period would later become known as “Sky Red.” The British brought in military and police reinforcements to quell the violence, but before calm was restored three Grenadians were killed by the police at La Tante, St. David, the pain of which is remembered in a monument to the victims. Eric Gairy was released from custody and made pleas to his followers to end their protests, thus bringing the unrest to an end. As part of the settlement, Gairy was able to secure the workers’ demands for better wages and working conditions approved by the estate owners and the government.

Working in Gairy’s favour was the impending constitutional change that was to revolutionize the islands’ politics when Universal Adult Suffrage was granted, giving voting rights to all Grenadians over 21 years of age regardless of education, occupation or property ownership. Armed with his new-found popularity among the mass of Grenadian workers and the poor, Gairy embarked on a political career by forming the Grenada United Labour Party (GULP) to continue the struggle for social change in Grenada. The GULP was able to dominate electoral politics and Gairy, affectionately known as “Uncle Gairy,” gained a large following that allowed him to push against the status quo and chip away at their power. Even the establishment of the Grenada National Party (in 1955) by business and professional interests did little to seriously threaten Gairy’s popularity among a plurality of Grenadians.

The failure of the long held dream of the Federation of the West Indies (by men like William Donovan and TA Marryshow) among the British colonies in the region in 1962, with the departure of Jamaica which chose independence, left Premier Williams of Trinidad to poignantly capture the feeling of doom when he remarked, “One from ten leaves naught.” Thus ended the Federation and the rush to independence for Jamaica and Trinidad, leaving the smaller islands few alternatives, but still clinging to the idea of some form of union between them. Unfortunately, both attempts – “Little Eight” and “Unitary State” with Trinidad – failed, forcing the British government to grant Barbados independence, and Associated Statehood to its mini-states because they were seen as economically nonviable due to their small size. Eric Gairy criticized and even protested Grenada’s newly won Associated Statehood status as “quite meaningless... a farce and a mockery,” even though the new constitution had granted Grenada internal self-rule. Gairy, despite being elected

Premier that same year, continued to criticize Associated Statehood and worked towards its termination by seeking to make Grenada an independent country much like Jamaica, Trinidad and Barbados.

With his massive political support Eric Gairy decided that the time was right to place Grenada on a sure path to political independence when elections came around in 1972. He had approached the British colonial government and they had given assurances that if he won an election where the issue of independence was a major pillar of the party's platform, they would consider his request. In the 1972 elections the GULP broadcasted their intent by labeling its Manifesto "Manifesto for Independence." Winning a massive victory against the GNP (13 to 2), Premier Gairy and the GULP took it as an endorsement and a mandate to seek independence on behalf of the people of Grenada who were supportive of his desire. Thus began the struggle for Grenada's independence.

Despite Premier Gairy's resounding victory at the polls, opposition to independence began to mount by the opposition, particularly by the newly formed groups of returning Grenadians who had new and different ideas of social change and advocacy. Primary among these groups was the New Jewel Movement (NJM) that resulted from the merger of two groups by early 1973. Its young leaders, headed by Maurice Bishop and Unison Whiteman, advocated for a more radical approach to social change and looked askance at the views of Eric Gairy as too conservative and even colonial in its outlook. The two groups soon clashed in several encounters that left the country very divided along these emerging political divides.

As independence talks with the British government progressed opposition to the attainment of independence mounted on the ground by a growing number of Grenadians who were concerned about what independence would mean under the leadership of Eric Gairy who seemed willing to circumvent the constitution to maintain control or have his way politically.

The year 1973 would prove quite a violent one as the issue of independence became public and the opposing sides clashed in support of their views. By the beginning of 1974 when a national work stoppage was announced and supported by the Committee of 22 (a broad-based group of civil society that included established churches), the island was on the brink of civil war. By the end of the first month of January the entire economy of Grenada was shut down, with most businesses and schools closed. In a reckless move, Premier Gairy sent his supporters to confront the opposition protesters who were engaged in demonstrations against the Premier on the

Carenage. The violent clash on January 21, 1974, later known as “Bloody Monday,” resulted in the death of Rupert Bishop, the father of Opposition Leader Maurice Bishop, and injury to many others. Following the clash on the Carenage, the supporters of Premier Gairy reportedly marched across the town and started smashing stores that had supported the strike and began looting. Others soon followed and several prominent businesses were destroyed after entire stores were looted.

By the time the scheduled date for the handover of Grenada’s independence had arrived the country was under a state of emergency and in total political and social chaos. In an attempt to quell the protest and make sure the independence events went off smoothly, Premier Gairy had several members of the NJM arrested, including Maurice Bishop who were held in cells on Fort George. On the night of 6 February 1974, government officials, dignitaries, foreign press, and invited guests gathered on Fort George, not too far from where Maurice Bishop and others were held, and solemnized Grenada’s independence from the UK with the flag raising ceremony.

The idea that a large segment of Grenadian society did not support the attainment of independence is nuanced and should not be thrown about recklessly. Though the struggle for Grenada’s independence had been hard fought on both sides and there was some acrimony, in the end the majority of Grenadians welcomed and celebrated that independence over the last 50 years. And the majority of Grenadians are proud of the Spice Isle’s journey since 1974.