

Faulkner at the Front - The Demonstration of 1949: Its Beginning, Golden Jubilee and Implications

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The 24th of November, 2015 will be the 66th Anniversary of the historic Demonstration which took place in Road Town, Tortola, V.I. This huge march, even by today’s standards, is of great significance in the annals of the history of this community of islands. In process of time, it was the flame that lit the path to constitutional, political, economical and social development during the better half of the twentieth century.

In order to better understand the far reaching ramifications of this Demonstration of 1949, it is important to place this historic milestone in proper perspective.

The Legislative Council of the Virgin Islands was abolished in 1901. The Presidency was then administered by the Commissioner, who was assisted by Executive Council. The Cottage Hospital, now known as Peebles Hospital, was opened in Road Town in 1922. The cotton industry collapsed in 1923 and the colony was severely struck by the ‘gale’ (hurricane) of 1924. By the 1930’s and 1940’s agriculture and fishing were thriving industries. The Civic League was initiated by a Tortolian, Hope Stevens was organised and this drew a petition, which requested the Secretary of State to restore the Legislative Council. Unfortunately, this request was not granted.

Matters came to head from the most unlikely source. One Theodore H. Faulkner, a fisherman from Anegada came to Road Town with his wife. She was expecting a child at Peebles Hospital and some disagreement rose between Mr. Faulkner and the physician. In frustration he spoke against the Government in the market place, where he articulated many of the social ills and discontent. This was the embryonic beginnings of a movement, which was supported by Virgin Islanders in the United States Virgin Islands the U.S.A.

The St. Thomas Daily News expressed the happenings in October 1949:

“A rambling sound is coming out of the British Virgin Islands which may soon attract the attention of No. 10 Downing Street” Harrigan, Norwell and Varlack, Pearl.

Thus, the stage was set. The curtains were being drawn for the historic Demonstration, sometimes referred to as simply the March of 1949. This huge Demonstration took place on 24th November, 1949 when some 1,500 persons from all over the archipelago of the V.I. gathered together in Road Town. This sleepy seaside capital echoed with the marching feet of demonstrators and the instructions shouted by the organizers. The three leaders were Theodore H. Faulkner, Isaac G. Fonseca and Carlton L. de Castro.

The demonstrators marched through the street to the Commissioner's Office and presented a petition, which indicated their grievances against the political system and the manner in which presidency was being administered. The first portion of the document read:

"We the people of the British Virgin Islands, theoretically a free people by reasons of the fact that we are supposed to be British subjects and citizens of the British empire, are today in numbers assembled as a Demonstration of Protest against certain conditions under which we have witherto been forced to live...One of the purposes of this Demonstration today is for us to achieve a measure of political freedom for ourselves and the generation of the future."

The Demonstration of 1949 is indeed one of the most significant milestones in the history of the B.V.I., during this the 21st Century. The tramps and shouts of the demonstrators will echo forever down the ages in the destiny of this Archipelago Territory.

In forty-nine some challenged this decree: With placards they boldly marched through Road Town. They wanted the fruits of democracy! They demanded the spoils of real freedom for themselves and their own children to come.

History will do justice to recall that the mass Demonstration of 1949, proved to be the catalyst which set in train a series of political and constitutional developments which still impact on the Virgin Islands. These included the elections of 1950, which resulted in the restoration of the Legislative Council in 1950 and subsequently General Elections, including of course that which was held as recently as June 8th, 2015.

The mass gathering also set the stage for monumental political decisions, such as the Virgin Islands to remain outside the West Indian Federation in 1958 and the introduction of the Ministerial System of Government in 1967. Such political advances also resulted in general progress, economically and socially.

The late Theodore Faulkner could be regarded as the 'Father of Modern Politics' in the V.I. In historical perspective, the Demonstration on 1949 and the Election which followed in 1950 are so crucial to the history and the development of the Virgin Islands that both events should be made more permanent and visible.

It was the Demonstration that brought about the first election of the 20th Century. It is most crucial also that the true significance of the Demonstration is clearly understood, appreciated and forever etched in the consciousness of Virgin Islanders.