

## REVIEW ESSAY

### The Partition of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper reviews the separation of the Ellice Islands from the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony, in the central Pacific, in 1975: one of the few agreed boundary changes that were made during decolonization. Under the name Tuvalu, the Ellice Group became the world's fourth smallest state and gained independence in 1978. The Gilbert Islands, (including the Phoenix and Line Islands), became the Republic of Kiribati in 1979. A survey of the tortuous creation of the colony is followed by an analysis of the geographic, ethnic, language, religious, economic, and administrative differences between the groups. When, belatedly, the British began creating representative institutions, the largely Polynesian, Protestant, Ellice people realized they were doomed to permanent minority status while combined with the Micronesian, half-Catholic, Gilbertese. To protect their identity they demanded separation, and the British accepted this after a UN-observed referendum.

*Keywords:* Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Gilbert and Ellis islands; independence; Kiribati; Tuvalu

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### Context

The age of imperialism saw most of the world divided up by colonial powers that drew arbitrary lines on maps to designate their properties. The age of decolonization involved the assumption of sovereign independence by these, often artificial, creations. Tuvalu, in the central Pacific, lying roughly half-way between Australia and Hawaii, is a rare exception. Consisting of nine islands with a total land area of only 25 km<sup>2</sup> situated along a 600 km north/south spread, it became the fourth smallest country in the world by separating from the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony. Tuvalu's secession deserves study as a rare case of agreed boundary-change before decolonization was accomplished.

The Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony (GEIC) lay astride the equator in the central Pacific between Longitude 150<sup>0</sup>W and 170<sup>0</sup>W. It is spread over 5 million km<sup>2</sup> of ocean. The distance from Ocean Island (Banaba, pronounced Baan-aba), lying west of the Gilbert group, to Christmas Island (Kiritimati), part of the Line Islands in the east, is 3,680 km. From Makin (in the northern Gilberts) to Niulakita (most southerly of the Ellice Group) is 1,680 km. The total land area was just over 800 km<sup>2</sup>, on a mix of coral atolls and reef islands. Geographic isolation presented unusual challenges for administrative supervision and precluded any sense of common community among the islanders. Moreover, the atoll environment severely limited economic activity. Scarcity of land, poor soil, and uncertain rainfall restricted edible plant life

to coconut palms, pandanus, and root crops grown in pits. Rain water had to be stored and fishing in the ocean was vital for sustaining life.

Partition of the GEIC into two separate dependent territories occurred in 1975. The Ellice Islands, renamed Tuvalu ('eight standing together') went on to independence as a Commonwealth Realm three years later. The rest of the Colony followed in 1979 as the Republic of Kiribati (pronounced Ki-ri-bass). Such fragmentation of already small populations (7,000 and 53,000 respectively) went very much against the grain of British administrative practice. When they first contemplated the Ellice separatist demand Whitehall officials deemed it 'a nonsense'. It also went against the grain of UN thinking: its Special Committee on Decolonization demanded freedom for all colonies, but deplored fragmentation, and did not try to unscramble the (usually artificial) borders created by imperialism. Small states were a potential nuisance. Secretary-General U Thant even suggested in 1967 that a line had to be drawn at some point to deter mini-states from seeking UN membership. But, with their formal adoption of a policy of 'accelerated decolonization' in 1975, the British were determined to get themselves 'off the colonial hook'. The official mantra was that they had no wish to force dependencies into constitutional arrangements they did not want. But they were acutely embarrassed by the precedents of Rhodesia's UDI in 1965 and the notorious Caribbean episode of Anguilla's secession from the Associate State of St Kitts-Nevis-Anguilla in 1967. Therefore, after the Ellice Islanders had expressed themselves decisively in a referendum, observed by a UN Visiting Mission, the British gave way and organized the new dependent territory of Tuvalu, while at the same time trying to ensure that this would not prejudice the future of the rest of the GEIC.

This article examines the motivation and methods for the separation of Tuvalu. It is based on communications with some key participants, a scan of relevant (mainly political and historical) literature, conversations with other scholars, along with unpublished correspondence accessed from now publically available archives of the United Kingdom's Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO).

### **Motives**

For the motives, one must first look at historical, cultural, and political aspects. A brief outline history of the creation of the Colony serves to underline its inherent division. The British Government was only reluctantly involved in the Islands. The annexation of New Zealand in 1840 had been followed by conflicts with the indigenous Maori and eventually to a decade of warfare. Thus when a naval officer rashly annexed Hawai'i in 1843 the move was repudiated. But the activities of colonists from New Zealand and from the Australian colonies as missionaries, traders, planters, and labour recruiters in the islands led to the annexation of Fiji in 1874. There were also some ambitious schemes in the settler colonies for more extensive expansion and demands that the British Government should move into New Guinea, the Cook Islands, Tonga, and Samoa (Morrell, 1960). After acquiring Fiji, the Secretary of State for Colonies determined to resist this clamour and deal with the problems caused by the activities of British subjects from the colonies by 'another means'. The Governor of Fiji was made High Commissioner for the Western Pacific in 1877 with Consuls in other islands appointed Deputy-Commissioners to exercise jurisdiction over British subjects (McIntyre, 1960: 274-94). When this proved inadequate to stem the harsh activities of labour recruiters, who moved north as far as Micronesia, naval officers were authorized by the Pacific Islanders Act of 1882 to exercise

jurisdiction over British subjects and in cases of dispute with Islanders, were authorized to resort to “acts of war” (Scarr, 1968: 169-175).

After Britain and Germany agreed to divide the Pacific into spheres of influence in 1886 (revised in 1899), the somewhat illogical line between them put northeast New Guinea, New Britain, New Ireland, and the northern Solomon Islands in the German sphere, leaving the rest of the Solomons, the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, and other groups to the east of the line, for the British. And since intermittent naval patrols failed to ensure security for traders or to suppress kidnapping, and there were rumours that the United States might intervene in the region, the German Government persuaded the British Government to take a more active role in its sphere, the motive being to protect the supply of labourers for German plantations in Samoa. Thus, in 1892 the Gilbert and Ellice Islands were proclaimed Protectorates based on treaties with island elders. The Solomon Islands followed the same path in 1893 (Munro & Firth, 1986: 63-71).

Another complication was soon added by the activities of the Pacific Islands Company registered in London in 1897. It had influential directors close to the Colonial Office and it mooted the idea of a chartered company to take over the whole region. It attempted (unsuccessfully) to create large plantations in the Solomon Islands. Then in 1900, after rich phosphate deposits were discovered on Ocean Island (Banaba), an agreement was made with some Banabans by New Zealander Arthur Ellis for the company to mine phosphate on the island for an annual rental of £50, provided that any land bearing fruit trees was avoided. In applying to the Colonial Office for a license to export phosphate, the company suggested that Ocean Island be added to the Protectorate. But the chairman of the company, Lord Stanmore (who as Sir Arthur Gordon had been first High Commissioner for the Western Pacific), persuaded the Colonial Office to annex Ocean Island. This was done on 28 September 1901 by a naval officer, who by proclamation made the island British territory under the supervision of the Resident Commissioner of the Protectorate. The company’s licence required payment of six pence per ton of its exports to the Treasury. In the following year the company amalgamated with the German firm, Jaluit Gesellschaft, which had acquired phosphate mining rights on nearby Nauru, to create the Pacific Phosphate Company, which embarked on an exceedingly profitable extractive industry on Nauru and Ocean Islands, eventually taken over by the British Phosphate Commission (a joint UK-Australian-New Zealand state enterprise) after the First World War.

For convenience of communications and to keep an eye on the operations of the phosphate industry, from which most of the Protectorate’s revenue ensued, the administrative headquarters was moved to Ocean Island in 1908. Only then was it realized what “a shockingly bad bargain” the Banabans had made (Scarr, 1968: 275). As the company continued to seek more and more land to mine, the Resident Commissioner insisted that a fairer price should be paid and that an additional six pence per ton be paid into a Trust Fund to purchase a new home island for the 400 Banabans should their homeland eventually become uninhabitable. It also became evident that administering the far flung Protectorate from one small British territory was leading to jurisdictional anomalies as to what law would apply in the different cases of British subjects, foreigners, and indigenous islanders. From about 1912, the suggestion was being mooted that the Protectorate, and also certain other islands that had been acquired earlier, should be brought within one legal jurisdiction under British sovereignty. This process started with the 10 November 1915 Order in Council making the Protectorate into the Gilbert and

Ellice Islands Colony (GEIC). Ocean Island was added to it on 27 January 1916, along with the northern Line Islands that had been acquired in 1889. These included Washington (Teraina) and Fanning (Tabuera). Later in 1916, the Union Group (Tokelau) was also included. Christmas Island (Kiritimati) most northerly of the Line Islands was added in 1919. The Tokelau Islands were transferred to New Zealand administration working from Samoa in 1926. When population pressure indicated the need for more land for the Gilbertese, the Phoenix Islands Settlement Scheme was hatched, and eight of the Phoenix Islands were added to the Colony in 1937 (Maude, 1968: 315-342). In these ways, the GEIC became a diverse and very scattered incremental dependency, the legacy of a complex history.

This jurisdictional complexity was reinforced by the advent of Christianity, which came to the Gilbert Islands first, from 1857, through the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, a Protestant body based in Massachusetts, using Hawaiian missionaries. These were followed by the Congregationalist London Missionary Society (LMS) from Samoa. But in 1888 the Catholic Sacred Heart Mission, based in France, also entered the Gilberts and would engender what became the majority faith (Macdonald, 1982: 31-53). Thus, while the Ellice Group by mid 20<sup>th</sup>-Century was overwhelmingly Protestant, in the Gilberts over half the population were Catholic. Despite the *intra*-archipelago variations, it was the *inter*-archipelago variations that were significant, and these were accentuated by cultural diversity.

All but one of the Ellice Islands was peopled by Polynesians. The darker-skinned Gilbertese and Banabans were Micronesian. The Ellice Islanders, of Tongan and Samoan origin, were very status conscious, with traditional social structures in which hereditary *aliki* were recognized as leaders whose authority was respected. Their assistants, *tao aliki*, looked after governing, working through the male heads of households. Within such island hierarchies all were bonded in communities. European traders from the 1820s introduced new material goods, but it was the coming of the LMS missionaries from the 1860s that introduced new sources of authority. Samoan pastors of the LMS came to rival the *aliki* in power and prestige (Munro, 1996: 124-57; Laracy, 1983: 19-24). In the Gilberts, the hierarchical principle was tempered by a system of rule by councils of elders, the *unimane*, who gathered in village meeting houses, *maneaba*, where careful mediation over the allocation of the limited land enabled the people to survive in an environment with scarce natural resources (Macdonald, 1982: 6-10).

For much of the colonial period, the two groups of islanders had little contact. They were under one government but nothing was done to foster a common identity and the two groups spoke different languages. By administering the different cultural groups as one political entity, regulations framed initially for the Gilberts were inappropriately applied to the Ellice. Then with the development of education and the building of King George V School, as government secondary school for boys, at Bairaki in the Gilberts, and the Elaine Bernacchi School for girls, promising Ellice students had to travel and reside there. The same was true for getting hospital treatment. There was also growing employment by the British Phosphate Commission in their facilities at Nauru and Ocean Island, and later employment in the civil service at Tarawa, the seat of government. In both cases, the Ellice Islanders fared better than the Gilbertese, partly through the influence of Donald Kennedy, a domineering schoolteacher at the Ellice Island school during the 1920s, who emphasized English language and academic achievement, and partly because of the disruption of Gilbertese development by the Japanese occupation during the Second World War. Thus, Ellice Islanders won disproportionately more scholarships and

gained positions in the Colony public service relative to their population numbers. Political stirrings in the 1960s arose through Gilbertese resentment of the alleged Polynesian superiority of their Ellice colleagues (Butcher, 2012: 28-31; Macdonald, 1982: 134-8).

If it was ethnic rivalry rather than anti-colonialist ideology that was the spark to politicization in the GEIC, it was anti-colonialist pressures in the United Nations rather than British liberal constitutionalism that led the British belatedly to contemplate leaving. The political awakening of the 1960s was preceded by a 20-year period when the idea of decolonization for the GEIC was firmly discounted. Shortly after the dismantling of the British Empire started with the flourish of independence for India, Pakistan, Ceylon and Burma in 1947-48, the Colonial Office's 'Smaller Territories Enquiry' of 1949-51 investigated the 26 smallest dependencies, most of which were deemed too small, scattered, economically unviable, and lacking in trained personnel for independence. As African decolonization began with the independence of Sudan in 1956 and Ghana in 1957, the 'Audit of Empire' on the remaining dependencies done during 1957-59 proved inconclusive as a guide to policy and its finding relating to the GEIC was that, if the British were to withdraw, the group "would relapse into primitive savagery unless another civilized country assumed the administration". To give up the islands would, it reported, be "discreditable" (CO Print, 1957: 73-5). UK Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's 'Wind of Change' speech in 1960 was focused on Africa. Faced in the same year with the UN 'Declaration on Decolonization', calling for the independence of all colonies, most of the colonial powers abstained. Only New Zealand, Netherlands, and the Soviet Union voted in favour. In refuting charges made by the Soviet representative during the General Assembly debate on 28 November 1960, David Ormsby-Gore defended Britain's record of giving independence to 500 million people. But he went on to say it could not dictate the future of small countries. It was not for Britain to say that the Gilbertese should decide immediately what form of independence they might ultimately choose (Ormsby-Gore, 1960: 985).

Through most of the colonial period in the GEIC traditional patterns of rule were adapted to serve the very slender government regime that could be afforded. For each island a high chief was recognized and the elders met in island councils. The new element that was added was the appointment of a Native Magistrate, who met with the Council of Elders as juries. To back up the magistrate there was a policeman and scribe. British District Officers wrote rule books and exercised intermittent supervision (Macdonald, 1982: 77-84).

Representative institutions were somewhat slow to develop because of sheer problems of distance and logistics. First there were conferences of Native Magistrates, who had become powerful local figures: colonial creations that had attenuated the standing of the traditional elders. Then, every two years from 1956 to 1963, there were Colony Conferences involving the Magistrates, regional representatives elected by Island Councils, missionary delegates, and civil servants. This became the forum for airing grievances and where government departments could explain policies. A more conventional colonial government was erected by Order-in-Council of 1963, with an Executive Council that the Resident Commissioner was obliged to consult, but was not bound by, and an Advisory Council in which some 8 to 12 non-officials met with civil servants to discuss proposed legislation. At the same time, some tension between Gilbertese and Ellice members of the public service surfaced. One disgruntled Gilbertese complained that the Ellice men acted "as if they owned the Colony" (Macdonald, 1982: 227). In 1965, the Gilbertese National Party was formed. In the second half of the 1960s, the whole

political atmosphere warmed up partly because of the looming prospects for self-government and elected representative institutions, and also because of awareness of decolonization in neighbouring islands.

As they moved tentatively towards developing some organs of self-government, British officials realized that the leap to a fully elected legislature would be premature. They envisaged a period when constitutional arrangements would “remain under a degree of tutelage”. They wanted to encourage greater participation by islanders, but not the imposition of some alien pattern. Val Anderson, the New Zealander who was Resident Commissioner from 1962 to 1970, suggested something less complex than the Westminster parliamentary model and he was attracted to a modified version of the ‘County Hall system’ based on the London County Council whereby executive and legislative functions were exercised by a single body working through committees with civil servants to assist. He suggested that the Advisory Council could be converted to a House of Representatives elected by universal suffrage, which would start off, not as a legislature, but a forum for discussion. A new Governing Council would have both executive and legislative functions. It would consist of the Resident Commissioner, 4 officials, and 5 members elected by the House of Representatives led by a ‘Chief Elected Member’. This experiment was approved in 1967 and tried over the next three years as a way of advancing political development.

The single-council experiment was short-lived because it gave little power to the elected members who were becoming aware of progress elsewhere. In UN Trust Territories, subject to international accountability, pioneering Pacific moves to independence could be observed. Western Samoa was granted independence by New Zealand in 1962 and Nauru (a joint Trust of Britain, Australia, and New Zealand, administered by Australia) gained independence in 1968 and also control of its phosphate, both the resource and the infrastructure (Macdonald, 1988: 54-8). Many Gilbert and Ellice men had worked on Nauru and Hammer de Roburt, the Head Chief and first President, was part-Banaban by birth, and was a friend of Reuben Uatiao (pronounced Wa-see-or), the most outspoken of the Gilbertese elected members. In the aftermath of Nauru’s independence, the political atmosphere of the GEIC quickened.

Further constitutional advance was made by Order in Council in 1970. As David Murray, Professor of Public Administration at the University of the South Pacific, put it, the GEIC moved on to “the standard British colonial tramlines” (Murray, 1982: 126). A Legislative Council (LegCo) commenced operating on 1 March 1971 consisting of 5 officials and 28 elected members. In the Executive Council a ‘Member system’ was begun whereby elected members were associated with particular government departments and Reuben Uatiao became ‘Leader of Government Business’. At the same time the GEIC was detached from the Western Pacific High Commission and given its own Governor.

The new constitutional arrangements exposed the Gilbertese and Ellice antagonisms. Because of the population balance, the Ellice members could never be more than a permanent minority in the Legislative Council. They now demanded separation. They perceived they would become a neglected minority group and in danger of losing their identity. They feared the tyranny of the majority. At a special ‘Forum Session’ of the LegCo they made their views plain and the Gilbertese members seemed to welcome the prospect of separation. The Governor, Sir John Field, toured the Ellice group in April 1972 and heard the arguments of representatives from all the Ellice Islands. As a result, in October 1972 the Heath Government sent Anthony

Kershaw, the Parliamentary Undersecretary who had responsibility for dependencies in the FCO, to assess the Ellice aspirations. At Tarawa he found a few senior Ellice civil servants who deplored the idea, but he also found Gilbertese civil servants who would welcome the departure of their Ellice colleagues. In the Ellice group he found calmly-stated but unanimous insistence on separation. Benjamin Kofe (of Funafuti) said there were differences of custom, language, and race. Having lived in the Gilberts on and off for forty years, he was concerned that the two peoples could not get along in the long run. If they did not separate, “the Ellice identity will be lost into, or swallowed up by the Gilberts within another 20 years or so” because of inter-marriage and use of spoken Gilbertese. Kershaw warned of the economic consequences and said they could never be independence if their bills were paid by someone else. But he made it clear that Britain would not “force people to live under a regime they did not want”. From the Gilberts’ point of view, Reuben Uatiosa told the FCO officials accompanying Kershaw that he was content with the status quo but would not admit any federal arrangements. He said Ellice people had “... typical Polynesian insularity. They liked doing things by themselves in their own groups” (Funafuti meeting, 1972). Returning to London, Kershaw reported to Sir Alex Douglas-Home, the Secretary of State for Foreign & Commonwealth Affairs, on the need to face up the Ellice demands. They were happy to be a British dependency, but were “absolutely unwilling” to be ruled by the Gilbertese. He had portrayed the difficulties for them and was told by one speaker that they could fall back on the simple life of fifty years back, of ‘fish and coconuts’. His conclusion was that accepting separation could avert the possibility of another Anguilla-style secession which would damage Britain’s reputation in the Pacific. He rated the chance of a UDI by the Ellice Islanders as high. He believed that they could not be independent, “nor do they want to be”. He recommended that a commissioner should be sent out to make a full report on the fiscal implications of separation (Kershaw, 1972).

From Kershaw’s mission came a sense that separation could not be avoided. It is therefore necessary to consider now the methods and manner adopted by the British Government. This was undoubtedly affected by major recent changes in Whitehall. The Colonial Office had been closed in 1966 by amalgamation with the Commonwealth Relations Office into a single Commonwealth Office. This had a very short life and in 1968 was merged with the Foreign Office into the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) for which priorities were very different. A Pacific Dependent Territories Department was retained as a joint organ shared with the new Ministry of Overseas Development. But the main focus of the FCO was on Europe, North America, and defence. Those outside these fields were regarded as ‘odds and sods’. A colonial official, who transferred to the FCO and was sent to the Pacific, wrote that colonial ‘retreads’ were among the sods and the “real bottom of the odds and sods league were departments dealing with the remaining Dependent Territories” (Stuart, 2001: 92). And a question soon hung over these as in 1973 the Prime Minister ordered that a ‘Performance Analysis and Review’ (PAR) should be conducted for all remaining dependencies. Out of this review the policy of ‘accelerated decolonization’ emerged in 1975.

From this atmosphere, the retiring Deputy-Undersecretary of the FCO, Sir Leslie Monson, went out as commissioner to report on Ellice separation in 1973. His arrival at Vaitupu must have been a cultural revelation. As it is a reef island he had to cross the surf to get there. His status entitled him to a traditional canoe from the vessel he arrived in - rather than being taken ashore by the ship’s motor boat - but he was not of such elevated status that the canoe was

borne aloft over the surf, so he had to get out and wade knee-deep in his suit carrying his FCO briefcase. He then had to stand dripping wet while a host of greeters sang all three verses of 'God Save the Queen' first in English and then Tuvaluan (Michael Walsh, personal communication, 2010).

Monson consulted widely and tabled a comprehensive report. He found a "self-contained community, enjoying a large degree of self-government with a minimum of control by central authorities" (Monson, 1973: 3). He listened to some absurdly ambitious Ellice demands: separation by 1974; half of the GEIC reserve fund; half of the Colony's shipping fleet; the cash equivalent of capital expended at Tarawa to go towards a new high school; guaranteed continued employment at the phosphate workings on Ocean Island, and the transfer of Christmas Island. Monson's response would have come as a shock. Separation would be possible subject to certain conditions. There had to be a referendum on the issue. The only asset transfer would be one vessel. There could be no claims on phosphate royalties, nor on any part of the Reserve Fund, even though Ellice Islanders had contributed by their work on Ocean Island. None of the Line or Phoenix Islands would be transferred (Monson, 1973: 57). There are those who believed that the conditions were designed to deter Ellice separation or to test their resolve. It is more likely that they stemmed from Monson's conviction that the demands were unreasonable and that, whatever the outcome, it should not prejudice the viability of the Gilbert Islands.

Yet, Monson had understood Ellice feelings and motivation. At one of the outer island meetings where he gave assurance that increased British financial aid could be forthcoming, because no phosphate royalties would go to Ellice after separation. Some hearers were sceptical of this promise. But one elder waxed lyrical on his faith in the British Government since it was "... known to give aid to 'niggers' in Africa and elsewhere", and they knew the British "... would prefer to give money to 'white people' like themselves" (Walsh, personal communication). Monson also realized the effects of intermarriage. Politically, he said the separation movement was "a measure of the extent to which progress in creating representative institutions at the centre of Government has outgrown the evolution of a sense of national unity in the Colony as a whole" (Monson, 1973: 57). The over-riding Ellice motivation was fear that they would be overwhelmed by the more numerous Gilbertese and that they wanted to preserve their identity; also fear that they would be shut out of employment opportunities in any post-independence arrangement by the Gilbertese. They realized that they had to separate before not after self-government; for, however harsh the conditions the British might impose, they would be even worse off if left to the tender mercies of the Gilbertese in a post self-government divorce.

Monson had heard no mention while in the islands of the idea of independence. But before finalizing his report he received a memo from a 48-year-old New Zealand-educated former schoolteacher now working on Nauru. Toalipi Lauti, who was GEIC labour relations officer with the Nauru Phosphate Corporation (and was another admirer of Hammer de Roburt), sent a submission to Monson in which he said that separation was "... a natural step caused by the political and constitutional changes that the Gilbert and Ellice people have experienced as being administered as one group". Further advances along these lines would be damaging to both groups. He called for a separate government and went on:

Ellice people will continue to advance politically and constitutionally until such time as the people of Ellice wish to gain independence.

Before that happened, he said they should “take over the government in a most natural way”. Monson found this a well-argued statement of the political case for separation and referred to it in his report, but he also pointed out that it was “the only reference I received for the prospect of eventual independence” (Lauti & Monson, 1973).

FCO officials were dismayed by the Monson Report. The Head of the Pacific Dependent Territories Department said a separate Ellice Colony would be “a financial, economic and administrative nonsense”. It could never be viable and would require permanent financial aid. As a new Governor was due in Tarawa later in 1973, he sought his confidential advice as to whether any delaying tactic might be possible (Nicholas, 1973). John H. Smith was an experienced colonial official having served for nineteen years in Northern Nigeria both before and after independence and more recently for two years as Financial Secretary in the Solomon Islands. He doubted whether it was feasible to “apply the brakes”. Arriving in Tarawa, he found people regarded separation as inevitable. All he could suggest was that it should be done according to an agreed time-table and be linked with advance to internal self-government. It seemed that at best they might get a year’s delay and the FCO Supervising Undersecretary for the Pacific, Nick Larmour, came reluctantly to the conclusion that they faced the choice between “... creating another mini colony or running the risk of having to deal with a breakdown of law and order”. When Lord Balneil, the Minister of State, put it to the Secretary of State he said separation did not make economic or administrative sense, but the decision must rest with “the people themselves”. Sir Alex Douglas-Home was philosophical about it, but wanted to be tough with the conditions:

There are a lot of nonsenses in this world so I suppose we can connive at another. But the cost is deplorable and I think we should say that, if they want to go their silly ways, they must bear more of the charge (Douglas-Home, 1973).

The decision was announced in the GEIC Legislative Council on 27 November 1973. The referendum went ahead in August-September 1974 and, in a huge reversal of policy for Britain, the UN Special Committee on Decolonization was invited to observe it. The Visiting Mission had the advantage of two Commonwealth members who were familiar with British modes of operation (Smith, 2011: 119-122). It was chaired by Sierra Leonean diplomat, Mrs Famah Joka-Bangura, assisted by Dilip Lahiri (India) and A. F. Al-Masri (Syria). After briefing by the FCO in London, they flew to Tarawa and sailed on to the Ellice, where they visited six islands. They could report that in a poll with a voter turnout of 88% 3,799 voted in favour of separation (92%) and 293 against. Their report also agreed with the Governor that it was “... essential that the outside world learnt more of the special difficulties which confront small territories in their endeavours to take their place in the modern world” (UN Visiting Mission, 1974).

The British Government abided by the wishes of the Ellice Islanders. It only remained for the separation to be effected on the ground. A new constitution came into effect in the GEIC on 1 May 1974. In lieu of the Legislative Council, a new House of Assembly of 28 members was elected. It voted in favour of Ellice separation in December 1974. The eight members who represented the Ellice Islands constituted an Ellice Committee. They decided on the name Tuvalu (ancient usage signifying ‘eight standing together’). They opted for a Cabinet with a

Chief Minister, two other elected ministers, and two ex-officio ministers. A new capital would be built on Funafuti. They proposed that the 8 Tuvaluan members should complete their term as a separate Tuvalu legislature. The date set for transfer of administration was 1 January 1976.

To confirm the desire for separation and work out the details, a new Head of the Pacific Dependent Territories Department and his deputy visited the islands in March 1975 and attended the Tuvalu Separation Conference held in the GEIC House of Assembly. It was agreed that there would be no bureaucratic tier between the FCO and the British representative in Tuvalu to be titled Her Majesty's Commissioner. A separate Attorney-General was also appointed. One motor vessel was transferred to the new government. The Motufoa School would be expanded to include a full secondary level.

Tuvalu came into being on 1 October 1975. Its legislature, the House of Assembly, comprised the 8 elected island representatives with 3 *ex-officio* members. It elected Toalipi Lauti as Chief Minister. On 1 January 1976, the separate administration took over at Funafuti. Half the executive consisted of politicians; the other half of civil servants. It was described as a ministerial system falling short of full internal self-government. In December 1976, Lauti moved a motion for independence in 1978. A Constitutional Committee comprising all the elected members was created. Professor David Murray, who had already advised in the Gilbert Islands, was invited to guide the discussions. He drew up a list of the issues that needed decision: whether to adopt a republican or monarchic model; whether a parliamentary or non-parliamentary executive was desired; the type of legislature and electorate; the public service, arrangements for constitutional amendment. The committee favoured retaining the Queen as Head of State represented by a Governor-General, and a single chamber Parliament (Murray, 1997: 259-274).

Lauti visited Britain as a guest of the UK Government in October/November 1977 to discuss preparations for independence. These were finalized at a full Constitutional Conference in Marlborough House in February 1978 to which Tuvalu sent no less than 52 delegates, including all MPs. They were disappointed that the Minister of State scheduled to preside, Lord Goronwy-Roberts, was delayed by snow and the proceedings were opened by a civil servant, Richard Posnett, the Dependent Territories Adviser. They were also disappointed that they got nothing from the GEIC Reserve Fund, nor any of the Line or Phoenix Islands. As Rev. Iosia Taomia put it: 'We came out of the Colony empty handed' (Cmnd 7144, 1978: 21). They did receive promises of three types of financial aid: a Special Development Fund to deal with problems arising from separation; development aid that was renewable; and budgetary aid to cover immediate deficits. But they were so dismayed by their treatment, not simply the conditions of independence, but by the lack of basic courtesies extended towards them in marked contrast to the generous hospitality accorded to visitors to the islands. Having flown half-way round the world to a cold London winter, they were so disaffected by their treatment that they bestowed the Polynesian gifts they had brought along to their hotel porter in Westminster! Independence Day was 1 October 1978, the third anniversary of separation. The Queen sent Princess Margaret to represent her, but before the celebrations had finished she was taken ill and had to be flown to Australia. Her private secretary, Lord Napier, read her speech and the Queen's message was read by Tom Layng, the one and only Queen's Commissioner to Tuvalu.

## **Conclusion**

In his valedictory despatch, Layng admitted that people would say that Tuvalu was the nation least prepared for independence. Only two Tuvaluans working in the country had university degrees. In one ministry, only the minister and his secretary had more than primary education. But he favoured independence because in all fields other than ‘top level government’ the islands had *always been independent*. Polynesians, he said, were proud, even arrogant, and regarded themselves as superior to other races they had encountered. He quoted Toalipi Lauti’s frequent assertion: “We will do things in our own way”. Layng felt that Tuvaluans could not bear being looked down as ‘colonial’ by other Pacific islanders (Layng, 1978). The GEIC Government had never endeavoured to forge a nation and Tuvalu would not stand for permanent minority status. Ideas of federation, loosely floated in the 1950s and 1960s, were never seriously pursued. Barrie Macdonald, historian of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, concludes that Tuvaluans chose the difficult path they did “to preserve their cultural identity” (Macdonald, 1975: 43). Whether that identity can be preserved in the face of sea-level rise and possible future evacuation to New Zealand or elsewhere remains to be seen.

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