

Saint Helena Island set to join World Tourism

Saint Helena Island, one of the most remote and inaccessible spots on Earth, will soon open up with the construction of a new airport. Most famous for being where French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte was exiled, the island has a rich history; culture and bio-diversity. However questions and doubts abound as to whether it will be ready to host the greater influx of expected visitors. The airport project is the latest plan by the British government to promote economic development and reduce heavy dependency on its support, but will it work? And what will happen if it does not? John Lowrie argues that Saint Helenians must be more assertive in promoting their interests, advocating not just for the airport but essential tourist infrastructure and services so that the tourism experiment can succeed. In addition he says the island needs diversified economic activities in case tourism fails, the fate that has befallen Norfolk Island in the Pacific. If the UK government cannot invest more, then the “Saints” as the Islanders are known, should appeal to other countries, donors and philanthropists. The island was discovered in 1502 by the Portuguese



and was briefly in Dutch hands before England secured it. It has good connections with the major countries supplying tourists. Do Americans know that Saint Helena provides the manpower for their military base on Wideawake (Ascension Island) or played a major role in stamping out the Slave Trade? Currently you can only reach Saint Helena by the last Royal Mail Ship of that name: <http://rms-st-helena.com>. For more information, access Saint Helena Tourism <http://sthelenatourism.com>.

Saint Helena Island - Over-Governed, but Lacking Direction?

The recent debate - in and around the Legislative Council (Leg Co) about whether or not to have a Chief Councillor – seemed like so many debates before, over too many years. There is a lot of talk, but little resolve or clarity? There are obvious explanations. Firstly, the members have no real powers other than to talk, and to talk to each other. In reality they should be talking directly with the real guy in charge in the UK and to other people who can help. Secondly, they do not have access to independent authentic sources of information to carry out their job, separate from “the Castle”. To do that, they need and should have their own Cabinet Office for research and to draft ordinances, etc. Thirdly, and most importantly the debate lacked depth of analysis and expansiveness, was it too parochial?

Now I can understand that people on Saint Helena would have doubts about the wisdom of expanding the Westminster governance model, with ministries on top of the already complex system. However, I do think they need to separate out the really big issues, and to talk about strategies for the Island’s future; what ideas will benefit future generations; what kind of public offices should it have; what lead roles and responsibilities are needed to enable Saint Helenians to be represented in the outside world? That world is coming ever closer due to modern communications and the new airport. Will extra tourism solve all problems?

I respectfully offer some thoughts from afar. My contention is this. If Saint Helena is to progress, Saint Helenians need to be much more self-assured about who they are as a people and their place in the modern world. The position of Chief Councillor should have been just one small step on the way towards greater autonomy and sense of self-identity. It may not be a title I would

suggest. Ultimately Prime Minister or President is what you should have. You have to look at this in terms of where Saint Helena finds itself today (based on history and contemporary developments), and where it would want to be best-placed in the future.

If today, suddenly arriving on the world scene is a territory of 5,000 newly-independent people, where would they go for help? They would go to the United Nations (UN). They would ask how to find the best way to administer their affairs and to develop their economy to provide self-sufficiency as a bare minimum for all. Prosperity for all would be the ideal aim. At the same time they would want to secure their rights under international laws. The UN is already set up to perform these tasks, and has a fair record of achievement¹.

If the UN were to take on such a mission, I cannot imagine that its main co-ordinating agency, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), or the World Bank, would come up with an organizational structure and economic model that resembles what you have today on Saint Helena. Saint Helena is still a British colony with most powers resting in the office of Governor, who is invariably a UK citizen dispatched there for tours of duty. Saint Helenians feel compelled to accept the arrangement due to the accompanying financial support. This creates and sustains the dependency mentality that permeates deeply in to life on the island. It is a serious barrier to progress that should no longer feature there.

This dependency relationship is outdated, whether you take a post-colonial position on the world², or the more recent enlightened thinking about the relationships between developed and developing countries³. This latter consideration is highly pertinent today to Saint Helena and its relationship with the UK and the Department for International Development (DfID). The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005); the Accra Agenda for Action (2008) and subsequent international forums have been transforming the culture by which overseas aid and development is given and received. Most crucially the relationship is supposed to change to one of equal partnership between donor and recipient; to local ownership of development by actors within the developing country, plus mutually-agreed meaningful measures to build internal capacity to assume local management of the processes. Accra and later forums have reinforced Paris, insisting upon more concerted and quicker efforts to achieve aims.



So if donors have shed their Fagan image, a recipient like Saint Helena can drop its Oliver Twist begging bowl pose⁴!

Readers can decide how they think Saint Helena has progressed in these respects. I would expect members of Leg Co, who are supposed to be the supreme elected leaders of Saint Helenians, to express frustration. What people on Saint Helena really need are not more experts from the UK but ones with more worldly experience to come as external impartial advisors. Such advisors must not fear the United Kingdom nor feel beholden to it in any way. They must be able to visit freely, to inspect openly, to enjoy unfettered access to information, and to report to you honestly. UNDP can provide persons. Why not ask?

¹ <http://www.un.org/en/events/nonselfgoverning/pdf/What%20the%20UN%20can%20do.pdf> See also UN Conference on Small island developing Nations: <http://www.sids2014.org/index.php?menu=1543>

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postcolonialism>

³ <http://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/34428351.pdf>

⁴ Thanks for image to <http://readinggroups.org/news/dickens-champions/dickens-champions-mitchell-classics-book-group-on-oliver-twist.html> The characters are of course from the Charles Dickens novel "Oliver Twist" published in 1837.

A UNDP advisor will almost certainly recommend that you should have a Saint Helenian spokesperson or advocate representing you. No foreign civil servant can do this task with the same knowledge or passion. I anticipate an immediate reaction. “We’re too small a population, insufficiently-educated, etc”. I would recommend local radio to pick up and relay “Pacific Beat” from Radio Australia⁵. Hardly a day goes by without one extremely articulate leader or another giving an interview expressing passionately his or her island’s interests. Just this week, as I write, I heard Tuvalu⁶ (pop 9,860) Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga explaining that rising ocean levels will make it uninhabitable within 25 years. Niue⁷ (pop 1,611) Prime Minister Toke Tufukia Talagi is arguing coherently for better support for the Smaller Island States Unit of the Pacific Islands ahead of the UN Conference on Small Island Developing Nations in Samoa. Samoans themselves right now are having a debate that many Saints will recall – are they entitled to full United States citizenship? I refer here to American Samoa⁸ pop 55,128, as distinct from the other Samoa Island, independent since 1962 but with close ties to the UK with and through New Zealand⁹.

So maybe Saint Helena “Ambassador” would be a better title than Chief Councillor at least for now. Leg Co should give further consideration to the idea. So the next question is “How would it be filled?” and “What terms would apply?” One answer is for selection to be according to the Leg Co members winning most votes in the single constituency election. The term of office could be limited to no more than two years, allowing at least three different members per mandate. You could specify “no more than one term at a time”, although that could have the disadvantage of depriving the community of a member they find particularly gifted and effective.

Eventually though a Saint Helenian must aspire to the top job on the Island, as I end this article below. I can understand that whatever the drawbacks of the present set-up, Saints unite around the idea that the Governor is for the most part a neutral referee. However, I think that you can cover this role in other ways, so as not to lose that most important Saint Helenian voice to be heard where it matters most.

A leading Saint Helenian voice could begin the move towards a simpler clearer governance model. Basically what you have now is a standard post-colonial model with a Leg Co bolted on to the all-powerful administration. It adds a layer of democracy, or you could regard it as a step in that direction. Then you have this peculiar mix of an Executive Council that does what organisational design purists do not like. It mixes people who are supposed to be policy-makers alongside those who are supposed to be implementers. That can cause role reversals. Elected officials are supposed to be the ones holding the administration to account, whereas in practice final authority rests with the administration. Leg Co members on the Executive Council are thus constrained, under the doctrine of collective responsibility, from discharging their primary duty to electors.

So you have a flawed basic organization to begin with. Then over time the operational structures and processes get even more complicated, despite the main purpose to serve such a small population and the need for efficiency. Whenever I read any of the myriad of development reports about Saint Helena, they all seem to come up with suggestions that tinker with the Island’s organizational structure and processes. They remind me of Microsoft’s never-ending “patches” to its operating systems. You see suggestions based on the particular field of the expert, even when

⁵ <http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/international/radio/program/pacific-beat>

⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuvalu>

⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Niue>

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Samoa

⁹ <http://www.factba.se/fco-page.php?bc=WS>

at times they admit to insufficient knowledge. Given the propensity to recruit experts from the UK, it means most “solutions” are UK models despite significant differences in scale and other factors (50 million versus 5,000 people?). The patching process is endless and piecemeal, giving rise to an impossibly complex administration, hence why I say Saint Helena is over-governed.

Saint Helenians are entitled to know about other models of governance around the world, especially from other small territories. They can learn from places that share similarities in use of their human resource capital; where their most talented people tend also to emigrate during their most economic years, sometimes permanently, and about the kind of incentives that can be designed for them to repatriate income; invest back home and return. By lack of direction, I mean the lack of strategic leadership, to take a proper overview of Saint Helena, especially its human capital at home and overseas. In particular I question the constant over-reliance on external solutions instead of nurturing home-grown ones. This is what rests behind “How many Technical Co-operation Officers are there?” and with it the self-evident truth that if they come free (i.e. paid for by the UK, not integral to the Saint Helena Government budget), they act as a disincentive to localizing positions and attracting qualified Saints to return home.

There needs to be a systematic review of everyday activities of life on Saint Helena. Who does what and why? Are they the best ways or the most appropriate ways? Are there better ways to the current domination and heavily-slanted governmental or quasi-government models? What about more pure private ventures; social enterprises, self-help groups; community-based organizations and even Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)? In developing countries, often NGOs provide the best public services or help citizens to see that state providers meet standards and good value for money. That review should encompass Saints living and working abroad. One thing that always struck me is why many Saints do better overseas than at home? There is a huge largely-untapped reserve in the Saint Helenian Diaspora.



What the children wanted?¹⁰



What the committee came up with!

One aspect of the systematic review must be a close examination of where the money ends up, and answers to the question “How much of it ever arrives on the island, let alone stays there?” Surely, too much goes elsewhere, where it is lost and not recycled to create wealth within the island? Siem Reap province in Cambodia is home to Angkor Wat¹¹, one of world’s most famous religious sites with more than 2 million annual visitors. Yet 45.5% of its 900,000 population remains poor. Tourism alone is therefore not the panacea to solve Saint Helena’s problems.

¹⁰ Thanks to <http://www.projectcartoon.com/cartoon/3> for the images.

¹¹ <http://www.tourismcambodia.com/news/localnews/8637/cambodias-angkor-wat-breaking-records-for-visitors-again.htm>

Whatever solutions you adopt, you certainly want to avoid replicating Saint Helena's current administrative balance where far too much of salaries, fees, and services never leaves the UK but nevertheless is charged as aid to Saint Helena.

The scene, I remind you, is if Saint Helena were suddenly to be a new country referred to the UN. The UN would treat it in the same way as any country in need of assistance for peace, security and nation-building. The UN has a number of its own agencies that can be mobilized¹². As well as UNDP, UNESCO's Small islands Developing States programme is particularly relevant to preserve Saint Helena's unique culture¹³. The UN would also co-ordinate other agencies, such as the World Bank and other relevant, potentially interested development agencies and foundations. (Many of them are equivalent agencies to DfID, but do things differently.) The World Bank would take a fresh look at Saint Helena's economy. Other major donors may wish to contribute. I could see for example:

- **France**¹⁴ saying: *"Great the UK has built the airport, but we are worried about Longwood House [Napoleon's residence belonging to France] being over-run, as often happens to tourist spots. Can we build a reception area for visitors with alternative holding attractions so that we can carefully control visitor flows?"*
- **United States**¹⁵ might say *"Wow, you Saints have done a great job for us on Wideawake Island, sure we can help you look at your governance. And seeing how much of your rich fishery resources could be taken illegally, maybe we can deploy our armed forces to help. We could assist you to set up your slavery exhibition centre with links to our Slavery Memorial".*
- **China**¹⁶ *"Yes, we know that some of you Saints are descended from us. You need a new hospital if you are to receive and look after many more visitors, with new essential intensive care and medivac facilities – we will build that, and convert the old hospital for a hotel, if you want?"*
- **Japan**¹⁷, one of the world's kindest donors, seldom attaching too many strings, could also be quite willing to support a major capital project, with attendant capacity-building of Saints, such as a tertiary college with a hotel; catering and hospitality school and/or an all-weather sports and leisure complex.
- **New Zealand**¹⁸ could be an excellent aid partner due to its (and Australia's) extensive experience with the more numerous Pacific Island communities grappling every day with similar problems. Certainly Saint Helena should not make the same mistake as Norfolk Island in over-reliance on its tourist industry. Saint Helena's scenery resembles New Zealand due to flax (*phormium tenax*), and this part of its history could also be exhibited alongside its endemic flora endangered by flax and other exotic plants. (Former NZ Prime Minister Helen Clarke is currently in charge of UNDP.¹⁹)

¹² Some of the main agencies are described, as in 1 above.

¹³ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/priority-areas/sids/>

¹⁴ <http://www.afd.fr/lang/en/home>

¹⁵ <http://www.usaid.gov/>. See also <http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/news/sc121710.htm> about the US National Slavery Memorial, perhaps with an interactive link to Ghana's similar heritage - <http://www.africapoint.com/safaris/ghana-slave-trade-cultural-tour.html>.

¹⁶ <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/africa-in-focus/posts/2014/07/16-africa-china-foreign-aid-sun> (English summary). Please note that China usually expects Chinese contractors to build infrastructure, which I think is fine given St Helena's current levels of skilled labour and the short timescale that you want the new facilities to be on-stream. Saint Helena once imported Chinese Indentured Labourers, the family name "Yon" is remnant alongside Chinese characters on sites.

¹⁷ <http://www.jica.go.jp/english/>

¹⁸ <http://www.aid.govt.nz/>

¹⁹ <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/operations/leadership/administrator/biography/>

This selection includes the largest potential tourist markets for Saint Helena to tap for future visitors, other than the UK and South Africa that are well-served now, and Europe via the UK²⁰. I think that most countries would be receptive to adding one more small country to their aid portfolios, assuming no objections from the UK. In fact, even if these donors were asked to co-match the airport project costs of around £192m or US\$ 320m (my guess is less needed), such a sum would be a tiny fraction of their own annual aid budgets and far less if shared with others or spread over several years – for example it would come to just 0.2% for the US; 2.9% for France and 3.3% for Japan²¹. (The total airport project cost represented 2.6% of UK annual aid expenditure, a timely sizeable chunk when all UK political parties were committed to maintaining the aid budget despite other public spending cuts.)

The key requirement is for Saints to take charge of their own affairs and future development, and to self-advocate their cause, the most important task of a Chief Councillor or Ambassador.

Strategically Saint Helena is approaching the biggest development in its history with the opening of the airport, yet the plan seems to be incomplete. Saint Helenians should not be afraid to express their doubts and worries. A full plan would consist of three elements, a triangular plan. (1) Build the airport and make sure that it operates to international standards (v). (2) Establish infrastructure and services to attract enough visitors (?). (3) Develop alternative economic activities to avoid dependency on tourism alone (!). This argument is sound. The UK is unable to allocate sufficient capital to complete an airport + tourism integrated project, plus a safety net of alternative development activities, so Saint Helena should be able to go elsewhere. Tourism can be fickle, especially after rare events such as air accidents. These days even the best hotels do not just rely on stays by guest visitors but have to promote conferences, exhibitions, themed events like weddings, etc. Saint Helena should have an accompanying non-tourism strategy to maximize the new airport access, which together with broadband, is conducive to attracting cottage industrial development based on technology and native English-speaking skills.

Saint Helena should take care to avoid too much private venture capital inflows or loans, if even “soft” loans. Private sources for capital will require returns, and loans repayment with interest, unlike grant-in-aid. Besides, I take the view that the ownership of the assets should rest with the people of Saint Helena in perpetuity.

I ask Saint Helenians “Do you receive on TV the State Opening of the UK Parliament, with the House of Commons symbolically slamming the door on Black Rod, the Queen’s messenger?” It denotes where power rests, with the elected chamber, no longer the monarch. Saint Helena’s Leg Co needs to close their door on a Black Rod too, and so figuratively put Her Majesty’s Governor in his rightful place in this day and age.

Now that real guy in London that Leg Co Members should be talking directly to is of course Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary Philip Hammond. For good measure you should also talk to his Opposition equivalent Danny Alexander, and the Chairman of the United Kingdom Overseas Territories All-Party Parliamentary Group, Andrew Rosindell. These days, there is no need to go through officialdom. Contact them through Social Media if you like with this article attached. You may be surprised and pleased by their reactions and those of friends around the world.

²⁰ http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/octs_and_greenland/index_en.htm. Saint Helena with Ascension and Tristan appears to be well-served by the European Commission.

²¹ <http://www.oecd.org/development/stats/ODA2012.pdf>

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The following map is borrowed from Deutsche Welle News Service (Germany)

