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5 June 1981

CABINET

DEFENCE AND OVERSEA POLICY COMMITTEE

INDEPENDENCE FOR ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA

Memorandum by the Secretary of State for
Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

1. The Government of Antigua have requested that the status of association with Britain should be terminated on 1 November 1981 and that this should be effected by Order in Council under Section 10(2) of the West Indies Act, 1967. The Termination Order would be for affirmative resolution in both Houses of Parliament. It is proposed that the new state should be called Antigua and Barbuda (see para 4 below).
2. Under the West Indies Act, 1967, six former British Colonies gained a status of association which gave them full internal self-government while Britain retained responsibility for external affairs and defence. The Act made provision for association to be terminated at any time, by any of the states acting unilaterally, or by Britain. In practice, each of the four states that have become independent so far (Grenada 1974, Dominica 1978, St Lucia and St Vincent both in 1979) have requested that this be effected by Order in Council under Section 10(2) of the Act. The Government of the sixth Associated State, St Kitts-Nevis, have stated that they will not be seeking independence in the immediate future although this remains a longer term goal.

3. Our criteria in deciding whether or not to accede to requests for independence remain, broadly, to ensure that independence is the wish of the majority of the people of the state in question, and that a constitution has been drawn up which adequately guarantees fundamental rights and freedoms. Both criteria have been satisfied in Antigua. At a general election in April 1980 over 98% of the electorate voted for one or other of the major parties, both of which campaigned on platforms which included a commitment to seek early independence. The Antigua Labour Party were returned to power at that election with an increased number of seats in the State's Parliament (now 13 out of 17). A draft independence constitution was considered at a conference in Lancaster House in December 1980. Delegates from the Antigua Government and Opposition parties, as well as a delegation from Barbuda, took a full part in the discussion and in the preparation of the Conference Report* (although the Opposition and the Barbudans refused to sign it). The final version of the constitution, which incorporates amendments made at the conference, has now been approved in the Antigua Parliament. It provides the basis for democratic government in an independent Antigua and Barbuda.

Barbuda

4. Representatives of the 1300 inhabitants of Barbuda, which has been part of the colony and (subsequently) of the Associated State of Antigua for 130 years, have said that they will not go to independence with Antigua. The efforts which have been made to allay their concerns, and to bring about an agreed solution to their differences, with the central Government, are described in an annex to this paper. I am satisfied that the interests of the Barbudans are more than adequately protected in the legislation enacted by the Antigua Parliament and by the provisions of the new Constitution, and that there are no grounds on which we could or should accede to their request for a separate status. In any event, the West Indies Act of 1967 provides that separation can only be effected at the request and with the consent of the Antigua Government; there is no prospect of this being forthcoming. Should the Barbudans seek to take matters into their own hands before independence, and seek to secede, either peacefully or violently, the Antigua Government may be expected to respond appropriately; the maintenance of law and order within the State, including Barbuda, is their responsibility and not ours.

* Cmnd 8142

5. Barbudans in this country have started a Parliamentary lobby in support of their cause. I think that we can expect the support of the Opposition in Parliament for our proposals for the independence of the unitary state. However, I must warn colleagues that precipitate action by the Barbudans, particularly if it prompted a strong reaction from Antigua, could give rise to criticism in Parliament and abroad. I do not, however, think that at this stage we should be deterred from going ahead with the introduction of the Antigua Termination of Association Order into Parliament at an early date in the present Session. I invite your agreement to this course, which I suggest we might discuss briefly at our next appropriate meeting.

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Foreign and Commonwealth Office

5 June 1981

ANNEX

BARBUDA

1. Representatives of the 1,300 inhabitants (of which less than half are of voting age) of the small island of Barbuda, 25 miles from Antigua, which, together with the uninhabited island of Redonda and the main island of Antigua comprise the Associated State, have objected to the proposal that they should go into independence as part of the State. They wish to become a separately administered British Dependent Territory or to become independent on their own, claiming that they have been neglected by the central Antigua Government in the past and that after independence they will be oppressed by that government. Strenuous efforts were made by us, in consultation with the Antiguan and Barbudans, before and during the Constitutional Conference to identify the Barbudans' specific grievances in this internal dispute, to help find solutions and to ensure that the new constitution contains entrenched safeguards against the oppression the Barbudans fear. A British financial expert visited Antigua and Barbuda at the Antigua Government's request in March. His recommendations to the Government and to the Barbuda Council on the future financial relationship between the islands were taken into account in the revised Barbuda local Government legislation enacted by the Antigua Parliament in April.

2. These various efforts continue, but I am satisfied that Barbuda's special position and the island's future social and economic development have been properly and constitutionally recognised. The Barbudans have been left in no doubt that a separate future is not an option available to them. Although the Barbuda Council still do not accept what has been decided or that the constitutional safeguards are sufficient, I believe that it is now right that we should grant the Antigua Government's request for independence. We made it clear to them what criteria should be met before independence; they have taken the necessary action to comply. The independence talks between the British Government and the Antigua Government and Opposition parties have been in progress for many months and have generally focussed on the objections of a small minority rather than the views of the Antigua Government which represents a majority of the people of the State. We shall continue to do all

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we can to help in bringing about a closer relationship between the islands with the primary objective of ensuring that the Barbudans do not attempt to achieve their separatist aims by illegal means. I am confident that the Council members are, at heart, (as they profess to be) reasonable men. I suggest that we should not seek to delay independence for Antigua and Barbuda while discussions continue, since the point should then be reached at which the Antigua Government could reasonably accuse us of ignoring the expressed wishes of the majority.

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