

**The Bahamas High Commission  
London**

**Fact Sheet #2**



**THE COMMONWEALTH OF THE BAHAMAS  
HISTORY**

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The original inhabitants of the Bahamas were the Arawak Indians. These first Bahamians were a gentle people who are thought to have arrived on the islands about 800 to 900 A.D. migrating through the Antilles from South America, fleeing the more aggressive and warlike Caribs.

Christopher Columbus' first landfall in the "New World" was on the Bahamian island called Guanahani. He landed there on October 12 1492 some 600 years after the arrival of the Arawaks. Columbus renamed the island San Salvador meaning "Holy Saviour" in Castilian. The inhabitants of the islands called themselves Lukku-Cairi or island people but Columbus, believing he had reached India, called the natives "Indians" thus they acquired the name Lucayan Indians and the islands the Lucayan Islands. The name however, did not endure as more notice was taken of the shallow turquoise waters by the Spanish explorers who began referring to the islands as "baja mar" meaning shallow seas. Now these 700 islands are known as The Bahamas.

The Bahamas remained in Spanish hands for more than a century though it only took the Spaniards less than 20 years to annihilate the first inhabitants of the islands. The formerly happy "Indians" were shipped off to work the gold mines and to die in slavery in Hispaniola. The Spanish took little interest in the islands after the potential for slave labour was gone and they moved on in their quest for gold and the Fountain of Youth.

1629 marked the beginning of English rule when England's Charles I granted The Bahamas to Sir Robert Heath, his Attorney General, but Sir Robert was unable to meet the conditions of his charter. However, the first permanent settlement in The Bahamas was established by a group of English settlers in 1648 fleeing religious persecution from Bermuda. They were called the Eleutheran Adventurers and were led by a man named William Sayle. This group of puritan religious dissidents landed at Governor's Harbour on the island of Eleuthera. But because of dissension among them Sayle soon parted company leaving Governor's Harbour by way of Spanish Wells for an island further west which the settlers called Sayles Island, now New Providence Island. Nassau, the capital of The Bahamas, is located on New Providence Island.

During the late 17th and early 18th centuries The Bahamas became a lair for pirates such as Blackbeard and Anne Bonney due primarily to its proximity to the important shipping lanes connecting Europe with the Spanish Main. It was not until 1718 when Woodes Rogers was appointed Royal Governor for the islands that efforts were made to crush the power of the buccaneers.

In 1776 during the United States War of Independence a United States Naval Squadron occupied the city of Nassau but withdrew after two days taking the Royal Governor and the Attorney General as hostages. As a result of the Revolutionary War about 6,000 Loyalists fled America and settled in The Bahamas.

During the American Civil War, The Bahamas became a haven for Confederate blockade-runners and served as an important transfer point for ammunition and medical supplies for Confederate ports. Later during the Prohibition Era The Bahamas again because of its proximity served as a base for rum-runners supplying liquor to the mainland.

Taking advantage of the serene climate and ideal weather conditions, the British Government and the Royal Air Force during the Second World War, use The Bahamas as a flight training area and a supply depot for the North African Theatre of War. The islands were also used by British and American naval units hunting German submarines in the Atlantic and the Caribbean.

In the post-war years The Bahamas became one of the world's foremost vacation resorts. In 1965 more than 720,000 visitors arrived in the islands. By the end of 1973 the figure had risen to more than 1,500,000, and more than doubled in 1987 to over 3,200,000. In 1995 the Islands received 3,239,155 foreign arrivals, 50% of which were by cruise ship and 40% by stopover visitors.

On 10 July 1973 four hundred and eighty one years after Columbus' landfall at Guanahani - now San Salvador - The Bahamas became an independent sovereign state.

## **Constitutional Development**

Constitutional development in The Bahamas was evolutionary rather than revolutionary. From the very early days The Bahamas had representative institutions which survived even the turbulent era of the buccaneers.

Even before the grant of the islands to the Lords Proprietors in 1670, the colonists elected a Governor by popular vote and made provision for the conduct of the Government under popular control by establishing a Council and an Assembly to legislate and enact laws.

The Royal Grant of 1679 made ample and detailed provision for the creation and working of a Parliament, one of the constituent parts of which was to consist of the delegates or deputies of "freemen" of the islands. This Parliament was given the power of taxation. There is evidence of considerable and important legislative activity during the closing years of the 17th century but it is doubtful whether Parliament played a very influential part in the life of the settlers during the first 18 years of the 18th century, for in 1717 the Crown resumed the civil and military government and the Governor was being aided by a Council alone.

The Governor-in-Council government continued until 1728 when the present General Assembly was created. The necessary power to summon the Assembly was given to Governor Woodes Rogers in his commission dated 26 December 1728 and the first Assembly, summoned by proclamation assembled on 8 September 1729.

Between 1909 and 1964 the executive Government was conducted by the Governor and an Executive Council under the authority of Royal Letters Patent dated 8 September 1909. The Executive Council consisted of the Colonial Secretary, the Attorney General and the Receiver General who were ex officio members, and five unofficial members who sat in one of the two Houses of the Legislature. The appointments were for five years.

The Legislative Council was created as a separate Council by Royal Letters Patent dated 12 January 1841 and usually consisted of about eight members who were appointed by the Sovereign.

The Bahamas celebrated 250 years of Parliament in 1979 making it one of the oldest continuous parliamentary democracies in the world.

### **Constitutional Change**

1964 was a momentous year for the Bahamas. On 7 January 1964 the country received its first written constitution giving Bahamians virtually full control over their internal affairs with the Governor retaining responsibility for external affairs, defence and internal security. Cabinet government was introduced for the first time.

The Upper House of the Legislature - formerly the Legislative Council - became the Senate and its membership was increased from 11 to 15, while the elected House of Assembly retained its designation and its 33 seats.

The 1964 Constitution re-enacted the provisions dealing with the protection of fundamental rights and important changes were made in the composition of the Senate.

A most significant change occurred in 1969 with a new constitution whereby the British Government agreed to entrust matters dealing with internal security and external affairs to The Bahamas Government. A Security Council was established for the purpose of consultation on questions of policy relating to external affairs, defence, internal security and the Police Force.

The final constitutional change was consummated on 20 June 1973 when the English Parliament enacted The Bahamas Independence Order 1973 granting The Bahamas full independence.

On 10 July 1973 The Bahamas became a sovereign independent state and chose to remain a member of The British Commonwealth of Nations.

## **Political Parties**

The first political party in The Bahamas, the Progressive Liberal Party (PLP), was established in 1953. The party was dedicated to fighting corrupt voting practices, racial discrimination and other political, social and economic ills which afflicted the country at that time.

The growing popularity of the PLP after its formation provoked the formation of the United Bahamian Party (UBP) in 1958 which comprised mainly the white ruling class. The UBP governed The Bahamas until 1967 led by Sir Roland Symonette, the first Bahamian Premier.

The Bahamas attained majority rule in 1967 when the PLP, led by Lynden O. Pindling, wrested power from the UBP in a general election. The UBP became defunct as a political party in 1970. Mr Pindling led the Progressive Liberal Party to successive election victories in 1972, 1977, 1982 and 1987 and became Sir Lynden Pindling in 1983 when he was knighted in The Queen's birthday honours that year.

In 1970 eight Parliamentary members left the PLP and became known as "the Dissident Eight". These men, led by Mr Cecil Wallace-Whitfield (knighted Sir Cecil in 1989), formed the Free-PLP but subsequently changed the party's name to the Free National Movement (FNM) later that year. The FNM became the second major political group in the country and eventually formed the Government in August 1992 after its election victory under the leadership of Mr Hubert Ingraham. The party's founder Sir Cecil Wallace-Whitfield died in 1991.

FNM leadership lasted a decade in The Bahamas. In May 2002 the PLP won the national elections and regained power. The party gained 28 of the 40 seats in the House of Assembly (the FNM won eight seats). Party leader Mr. Perry Christie became only the 3rd Prime Minister since Bahamas gained her Independence from Britain in 1973. The party's founder Sir Lynden Pindling died in August 2000.

After the 2007 general elections, the Free National Movement, once again under the leadership of the Right Hon. Hubert A. Ingraham, returned to office.