

# THE FAILINGS OF GOVERNANCE IN ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA

THE ELECTIONS OF 1999

Douglas W. Payne  
June 1, 1999

Policy Papers on the Americas



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Volume X Study 4

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CSIS Americas Program

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# Preface

The degree to which elections are a reliable barometer of democratic governance is a matter of some dispute. Voters in the United States, for instance, have a rather casual attitude toward visits to the voting booth. An average of 49 percent never bother to exercise this fundamental right.<sup>1</sup> Recent elections throughout the Caribbean and Central America suggest a similar choice. Why?

The decision not to vote is an option offered by democracies but is made possible only because other features of the system remain dynamic. Timeliness and orderly electoral procedures, and reasonably transparent use of resources (monetary and otherwise) by all parties in the race are fundamental to a healthy competitive political environment. The intent of leaders in office as they go about seeking reelection has become the target of electoral, ethical, and administrative regulations in much of the western world's democratic systems. Campaign financing, access to media, and voter education are examples of the calibration now present in modern democracies. In other words, elections do not happen in vacuum.

When CSIS launched its Western Hemisphere Elections Study Series almost two decades ago it did so on the premise that the process of democratization was entering a critical phase of institutionalization. This required a more strategic analysis than that provided occasionally by the media and in a more timely fashion than available from academia. About 200 studies have been issued, including some 45 on Caribbean countries.

One of the more significant markers in the early 1980s was the degree to which the Caribbean stood out. While Cuba and Haiti were (and remain) in varying ways off the charts, the English-speaking Caribbean stood out as a remarkable concentration of democratic societies. Ensuing from British parliamentary political culture, the region had transited not too painfully from colonialism and sustained not just the trappings but the traditions of democratic governance. Not always attentive to this region, even Washington had belatedly recognized the strategic significance of this extraordinary community of democratic governments.

Fast-forward to the late 1990s and the Caribbean has in the interim lost its uniqueness. Central America, and more generally Latin America, have undergone a significant regeneration of democratic political and free market economic governance. The process has had its challenges and reversals remain a constant possibility. Arguably, however, the democratic Caribbean has in the meantime stagnated. The factors leading to this may be diverse—for example, the pressures of international trade competition and economic development, as well as new security threats stemming from the globalization of crime. But the indicators are worrisome and the institutions of parliamentary democracy remain challenged throughout the region.

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<sup>1</sup> International IDEA Voter Turnout from 1945-1998.

In the past decade CSIS has intensified its coverage of Caribbean politics, covering both country-issues as well as regional policy. An expanding agenda led to the development of a supplement to the Election Study Series, which has now become the Policy Papers on the Americas (PPA). The latter series has had extensive Caribbean content.<sup>2</sup> CSIS interest in the Caribbean is long-standing and integrated into its hemispheric and even global research agenda. The methodology for these studies has been straightforward for a Washington-based US policy-focused think tank: identify significant and emerging issues of policy relevance to both the United States and the Caribbean region, present credible and timely analyses, and generate constructive debate.

Antigua and Barbuda, and the rest of the Eastern Caribbean, involves a small country, limited resources, and considerable pressures from the outside. No doubt, US analysis of Caribbean politics is prone to generate some unease in the region. This requires careful and open discussion. It is with these factors in mind that we issue this in-depth assessment of Antigua and Barbuda's political process. The point of departure is the elections held early this year. The outlines of the process and results are now well known. Therefore, the primary aim of issuing this study is to address a broader subject, that of the character of democratic governance in Antigua and Barbuda and a continuing interest in its maintenance throughout the Caribbean.

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<sup>2</sup> Most notably: *The Integration of Small Economies in the Free Trade Area of the Americas*, (Bernal, 1998), *Storm Watch* (Payne, 1998), *The Second Cold War* (Vega, 1998), *Emerging Voices* (Payne, 1998), *Haiti and Caricom* (Tardieu, 1998), and *How Local Leaders Shape Development Policies* (Moore-Miggins, 1997).

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## General Data

Population	Estimates range between 63,739 and 69,000	
Voting Age	18 and over	
Registered voters	52,385	(43,749, 1994)
Total ballots cast	33,320	(27,263, 1994)
Rejected ballots	223	(147, 1994)
Valid votes	33,097	(27,116, 1994)
Voter turnout	63.61 percent	(62.32 percent, 1994)

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## Major Parties Involved

ALP Antigua Labour Party  
UPP United Progressive Party  
BPM Barbuda People's Movement

Small parties that participated:

AFP Antigua Freedom Party  
NRM National Reform Movement

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## Election Results

Party	Total votes	% Vote	Seats Won 1999 (1995)
ALP	17,521	52.94	12 (11)
UPP	14,713	44.46	4 (5)
BPM	418	01.26	1 (1)
AFP	57	00.17	
NRM	33	00.10	
Inds.	355	01.07	
Total	33,097	100.00	17 (17)

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Source: Supervisor of Elections, Antigua and Barbuda.





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## Overview

- Prime Minister Lester Bird gains second term, family dynasty continues.
  - Electoral process neither fair nor completely free, ballot secrecy subverted.
  - Commonwealth Observer Group recommends overhaul of electoral system.
  - Opposition to challenge validity of elections in the courts.
  - Rule still based more on power and the abuse of authority than on law.
  - No public audit of government accounts since 1983.
- 

## Executive Summary

The Bird family retained its hold on power as the Antigua Labour Party (ALP) defeated the United Progressive Party (UPP) in parliamentary elections held on March 9, 1999. The outcome gave Lester Bird, whose father began the dynasty nearly five decades ago, a second term as prime minister.

The electoral process was neither fair nor completely free. The ALP's domination of the broadcast media, its inordinate use of public resources to influence the vote, and its vast, unaccountable spending made for a highly uneven playing field and confirmed that rule in Antigua and Barbuda is still based more on power and the abuse of authority than on law. The reach of the ALP extended into the electoral system itself, compromising voter registration and the conduct of the vote, and undermining the secret ballot.

The Commonwealth Observer Group, while appreciating that election day was free of violence and intimidation, called attention to the lack of fairness and the electoral deficiencies when it recommended in a written report that a fully independent electoral commission be established, with a mandate to revamp the voter registry, introduce voter identification cards, appoint impartial electoral officials, ensure fair media access, regulate campaign spending, and fully guarantee ballot secrecy.

According to official results, the opposition actually narrowed the gap in terms of the popular vote. The UPP won 44.46 percent of the vote, up

from 43.70 percent in 1994, while the Barbuda People's Movement (BPM), the UPP's ally on Barbuda, took 1.26 percent, giving the main opposition parties a combined 45.72 percent. The ALP won 52.94 percent, down from 54.44 percent in 1994, but in the first-past-the-post system wound up with 12 of the 17 parliamentary seats, up from the 11 in 1994. The UPP came away with four seats, down from five in 1994, while the BPM retained the Barbuda seat, giving the opposition a total of five seats, one less than in 1994.

The UPP lost in five constituencies by a combined total of only 554 votes. If the electoral process had been free and fair, the UPP conceivably could have won a majority of seats. A week after the vote, the UPP filed petitions challenging the validity of the elections in six constituencies, including that of Prime Minister Bird. Trial proceedings in the High Court were tentatively scheduled to begin in mid-summer.

During the campaign the UPP emphasized the issue of corruption, focusing on the series of scandals, disregard for official inquiries, and lack of accountability during successive ALP governments. Under the slogans "Leadership You Know You Can Trust" and "We Are Not for Sale," the UPP promised clean, transparent government and a code of conduct requiring cabinet ministers to declare personal assets and income to ensure against conflicts of interest.

The ALP campaigned on the themes of "We Deliver" and "Empowering the People." It touted job creation, new investment, and economic growth during the first Lester Bird government, and promised to eradicate unemployment and increase wages. The ruling party assailed the UPP for its opposition to a major tourism complex, and claimed that the UPP planned to cancel all foreign-funded development projects initiated by the ALP. UPP leader Baldwin Spencer countered that the party would continue the policy of welcoming foreign investment, but would aim for more joint-project relationships and involvement of Antiguan businesses.

Following the vote, Prime Minister Bird called for national unity, stating, "Our hearts must not be hardened, our hearts must be gladdened." The reality is that these elections left the country more polarized and opposition supporters more embittered than ever. And while citizens awaited rulings on the UPP's petitions—which could lead to the holding of by-elections, as was the case in 1989—questions remained about the true state of the economy.

Antigua and Barbuda has one of the highest per capita foreign debts in the world, and the Bird government continues to borrow to cover a gaping budget deficit. The gap almost certainly widened as a result of the ALP's heavy public spending during the campaign. The ALP claims that the government is current on all debt servicing and that the deficit is manageable. But its assertions are difficult to verify because, despite a constitutional requirement that there be an annual public accounting of all government finances and

expenditures, the last year for which an audit was presented to parliament was 1983.

## **Background**

### ***System of Government***

Antigua and Barbuda is a member of the British Commonwealth. The British monarchy is represented by a governor-general. The island gained independence on November 1, 1981. Under the 1981 constitution, the political system is a parliamentary democracy with a bicameral parliament consisting of a 17-member House of Representatives elected for five years (subject to dissolution) and an appointed Senate.

In the House of Representatives there are 16 seats for Antigua and one for Barbuda. Executive governmental authority is invested in the prime minister, who is the leader of the political party commanding a majority of seats in the House. Eleven senators are appointed by the prime minister, four by the parliamentary opposition leader, one by the locally elected Barbuda Council, and one by the governor-general.

Based on the 1981 constitution, the judiciary is independent. The highest court is the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court (based on St. Lucia), which includes a Court of Appeal and a High Court, one of whose judges is resident on Antigua. There is a right of ultimate appeal in certain circumstances to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London.

### ***Birth of the Bird Family Dynasty***

In the mid-1930s, most workers in Antigua's depressed, sugar-based economy earned less than their counterparts did following emancipation from slavery a hundred years before. The man who emerged to lead them against the white, colonial plantocracy was Vere Cornwall "V.C." Bird, a one-time Salvation Army captain born in the slums of St. John's in 1910 who was among the co-founders of the Antigua Trades and Labour Union (ATLU) in 1939. Supported by young militants and displaying the backroom moves he would wield throughout his career, Bird triumphed in an internal power struggle and became the ATLU's second president in 1944. A year earlier, the planters had banded together to fight the union, forming a single company which owned nearly three-quarters of all the land in Antigua. The ATLU eventually prevailed and "Papa," as grateful workers came to call Bird, would become part of the pantheon of Caribbean labor leaders who transformed union strength into political power following World War II.

Bird, a towering physical presence and tireless organizer, led strikes for better pay and engineered a campaign to demand voting rights and a fully elected colonial legislature. In 1951 British colonial authorities conceded to universal adult suffrage and increased to eight the number of elected representatives in the 13-member legislative body. Following elections at the end of that year, the ATLU occupied all eight elected seats, the first step toward dismantling the planters' political dominance. In the 1956 elections, the ATLU retained all eight elected seats. Meanwhile, Bird's radical, anti-colonial approach won him strong support among the ATLU rank and file, which he wielded to force out ATLU officials who questioned his leadership. By 1952, most of his co-founders were gone from the union.

In 1959 the British granted a greater degree of internal autonomy. Following constitutional reforms, substantial governmental authority was transferred from the colonial governor to a chief minister, the leader of the group holding a majority of seats in the legislature. The ministers of finance and labor for the first time would be chosen from among elected legislators and the entire cabinet appointed by the chief minister. The number of elected seats in the legislature was increased from eight to 10.

In the 1960 elections the ATLU swept all the elected seats against an opposition of mostly independent candidates, and V.C. Bird became chief minister. A number of the independents dropped out during the campaign because of often violent intimidation by ATLU supporters. In the 1965

### ***The Country***

The twin-island nation of Antigua and Barbuda is part of the Leeward Islands, which comprise the northern portion of the Eastern Caribbean chain. Its neighbors are St. Kitts and Nevis to the west, Montserrat to the southwest, and Guadeloupe to the south. The nation's boundaries also include Redonda, a craggy, uninhabited island of less than one square mile, which lies 25 miles southwest of Antigua.

Antigua is vaguely rounded in shape, with a land area of 108 square miles, somewhat less than twice the size of Washington, D.C. The sharply indented shoreline features many small off-islands, coves, inlets, and beaches. Most of the island is flat, except for the southern portion, which is of volcanic origin and hilly. Barbuda, a low-lying island 25 miles north of Antigua, has a land area of 62 square miles.

Population estimates vary. The *World Factbook* estimated the population at 63,739 in 1997. The U.S. State Department estimated that it was 68,600 in 1996, while the British Commonwealth put the figure at 65,000 in 1995. The figure most commonly used in Antigua and Barbuda is 69,000. Approximately 98 percent of the population lives on Antigua.

National population growth has been held down by migration, particularly to the United States. The Caribbean Research Center at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn estimated in the early 1990s that nearly 22,000 people of mostly Antiguan but also Barbudan origin were residing in New York City alone.

Approximately 90 percent of the population are black, descendants of slaves brought from Western Africa in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The remaining 10 percent includes descendants of British colonial settlers, Portuguese laborers, and Lebanese and Syrian traders, as well as people of mixed origin. English is the official language.

elections the ATLU again won all the elected seats, this time against the Antigua & Barbuda Democratic Movement (ABDM) which had been founded in 1962 by Robert Hall, a civil servant. The ABDM filed petitions to void the results in five constituencies because of alleged irregularities, but the High Court dismissed the cases.

In 1967 Great Britain granted Antigua and Barbuda the status of associated statehood with full internal self-rule and V.C. Bird became the first premier. The legislature was refashioned as a bicameral body, with an elected House and an appointed Senate. Most of the remaining Antiguan planters prepared to return to England. The Bird government passed a law authorizing it to borrow the money from Great Britain to buy out their vast acreage. By the end of 1967 V.C. Bird controlled the government, the ATLU, and the sugar industry.

The downside of this virtually one-man rule had been apparent for a number of years, particularly with regard to the ATLU. By the time V.C. Bird had become chief minister, he was treating the union more as a vehicle for preserving political power than an organization to safeguard worker rights. Government jobs and positions on statutory boards were given only to the most loyal ATLU officials, whose interest in the union then usually waned. The integration of the government and the ATLU based on favoritism rather than competence angered many rank and file members, as did the freezing of sugar industry wages in 1963 and a 30-percent wage cut in 1967.

Nearly half of Antiguan are nominally affiliated with the Anglican Church. Other denominations include Roman Catholic, Moravian, Methodist, Seventh Day Adventist, Lutheran, and Jehovah's Witnesses. In recent years, there has been a notable increase in the numbers of people attending evangelical churches.

The country's currency is the Eastern Caribbean dollar (EC\$1), which has a fixed rate of US\$1 = EC\$2.70. All monetary figures in this report are in U.S. dollars unless otherwise specified.

Tourism is the nation's principal industry and foreign exchange earner and employs nearly half the work force. Visitors from the United States account for about half of tourist arrivals. Tourism and other services, including offshore banking and, more recently, Internet gambling, account for more than three-quarters of gross domestic product. Industry, including construction, accounts for 18 to 20 percent. Agriculture continues to decline and now constitutes only a little more than three percent. Antigua and Barbuda is a beneficiary of the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI), but exports to the United States, mainly from small-scale manufacturing, are minimal.

Gross domestic product in 1997 was estimated at \$570 million by the World Bank, with per capita income estimated at somewhat more than \$8,000, just ahead of Barbados and second only to the Bahamas in the Caribbean Community (CARICOM).

The external debt has spiraled over the last decade and a half, climbing from about \$60 million in 1984 to \$466 million in 1997, or 82 percent of gross domestic product, according to the World Bank. On a per capita basis, the nation's external debt is one of the highest in the world.

Antigua and Barbuda is a member of the Organization of American States (OAS), CARICOM, the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), and the Association of Caribbean States (ACS), and is a signatory of the Lomé Convention.

In the early 1960s Bird decided on tourism as the principal engine of economic growth and began to promote the expansion of the hotel industry. By mid-decade, tourism had become the nation's largest employer. When it came to labor relations, the government usually sided with the hoteliers. During one set of negotiations, workers were stunned to discover that a member of the ATLU executive committee and close associate of Bird was the legal representative for hotel management. The government also sided with British West Indies Airways (BWIA), even as airport workers were represented by the ATLU. When some workers and union organizers threatened to stop paying dues if government ministers did not give up their union posts, they were warned that they would lose their jobs. Ernest Williams, the public works minister as well as first vice-president of the ATLU, reportedly told workers that the union was the government.

There were also concerns regarding the quality of governance. According to Keithlyn B. Smith, author of a history of the Antiguan labor movement which is generally critical of the Bird family, in 1963 an economic advisor to the government wrote to the British colonial administrator that, "Political patronage has resulted in too much unaccountability of public funds. Efficiency in the service has dropped to an alarming rate. The supporters of the Government Ministers are left to do as they please. The main offenders are found in the Ministry of Finance." The minister of finance was V.C. Bird.

In the mid-1960s a clash developed between Bird, still president of the ATLU, and a group of ATLU officials including General Secretary George Walter and ATLU executive member Donald Halstead. Neither Walter nor Halstead held government positions and both believed the union should represent workers rather than act on behalf of the government. According to Smith, Bird initially kept Walter and Halstead at bay by arbitrarily overturning the results of a union election in 1966. A year later Bird orchestrated their dismissal as union officials, alleging that they were blocking government efforts to save the sugar industry.

Many in the ATLU still revered Bird, and his loyalists in government worked diligently to preserve his image as a national hero. But Walter and Halstead were well respected as negotiators and organizers. When they founded the independent Antigua Workers Union (AWU) in mid-1967, thousands of ATLU members, as well as numerous key organizers, went with them. The Bird administration countered by firing government workers who joined the AWU, while private investors, desiring to keep their government-granted tax-free status, followed suit. The AWU called a general strike, supported by civil service workers led by teacher Tim Hector, inaugurating a tense, often violent period which saw the first imposition of martial law in nearly 50 years.

The government eventually backed down. It granted legal status to the AWU, and agreed to by-elections for four newly created seats. In preparation for the 1968 by-elections, the AWU, the ABDM, and the Antigua Progressive

Movement (APM), a small party of lawyers and business people, formed the Progressive Labour Movement (PLM) under the leadership of George Walter. The PLM defeated the ATLU in all four races and became the first opposition to hold elected seats since the advent of universal suffrage in 1951.

At the 1969 ATLU convention V.C. Bird arranged to be succeeded as union president by a loyal associate, then oversaw the creation of the Antigua Labour Party (ALP) with himself at the helm. Meanwhile, the AWU had successfully won bargaining rights in much of the private sector. As the PLM geared for the next elections in 1971, Walter resigned as AWU general secretary to devote his time to the campaign. The PLM, backed by the AWU and maintaining the momentum it had established in the 1968 by-elections, won the 1971 vote by taking 14 seats against three for the ALP. The electoral boundaries were redrawn prior to the 1971 elections and the number of constituencies had been increased from 14 to 17. Walter became the new premier while V.C. Bird, defeated in his own constituency, was out of public office for the first time in his career.

### ***V.C. Bird and Sons***

George Walter's government inherited a substantial foreign debt and, because the Bird administration had paid little interest in the previous three years, most banks had cut off credit. Walter's administration was hamstrung, too, by the onset of global recession and the world oil crisis in the early 1970s, a drought, and an earthquake which struck Antigua in 1974. Tourism declined, construction ground nearly to a halt, the last remnants of the sugar industry were shut down, and unemployment rose to nearly 20 percent. Walter implemented an agricultural development program which had some success in stimulating vegetable cultivation, but ran into problems in poultry production when Antiguan rejected home-grown chickens and demanded a return to imported birds.

The Walter government also was the target of a terrorist campaign. A clandestine group calling itself the Antigua Freedom Fighters (AFF) threatened to drive Walter from office within a year and took credit for a series of bombings and attempts to sabotage the electrical system. Although no one was killed in the explosions, they spread fear throughout the population. At times the AFF seemed to be in league with Radio ZDK, a station founded by the Bird family in 1970. Radio ZDK was the principal channel for AFF bomb threats which caused schools, government buildings, and businesses to be evacuated. The threats and explosions stopped in mid-1973 when police arrested Clarence Pilgrim after finding in his home the equipment used to print the AFF's underground newspaper.

Pilgrim, a leading figure in both the ATLU and the ALP, was charged with distributing seditious publications. He was represented by the firm of Bird and

Bird, started a few years earlier by Vere Cornwall Bird, Jr., and Lester Bryant Bird, V.C. Bird's oldest and second-oldest son, respectively. Both had received legal degrees in London and, like their father, were well over six feet tall. Lester, who was born in New York City in 1938, had received an undergraduate degree at the University of Michigan where he was a record-setting broad jumper. The prosecution of Pilgrim dragged on in the courts until 1976 when the ALP, voted back into power, let the case wither until Pilgrim was freed.

The PLM administration also was weakened when Walter left Tim Hector out of his government. Hector was an AWU stalwart, chairman of the PLM, and editor of its newspaper, *The Trumpet*. But Walter was wary of Hector because of his strong-willed intensity and because Hector's leftist politics irritated the British. Hector left the PLM to form the Antigua Caribbean Liberation Movement (ACLM) and became editor of its newspaper, *Outlet*. The ACLM and *Outlet* were sharply critical of restrictions on civil liberties and press freedoms imposed by the Walter government in response to the AFF bombing campaign. At one point, Hector was briefly jailed and *Outlet* shut down by court order.

The PLM retained a significant degree of popular support, in part because it implemented a new labor code which for the first time provided protection against unjust dismissal. In fact, the PLM actually won the popular vote in the 1976 elections by a little less than one percent. But a number of PLM candidates lost by slim margins in their constituencies and in the first-past-the-post system the ALP won the elections with 12 seats against five for the PLM. V.C. Bird, Vere Jr., and Lester all won seats for the ALP. V.C. Bird returned as premier, named Lester deputy premier, and gave him the foreign affairs, tourism, and energy portfolios in the new ALP cabinet.

### ***An Increasingly Authoritarian Regime***

The Bird government was determined that the PLM would not return to power. Following a month-long commission of inquiry into five years of PLM rule, George Walter and two former cabinet ministers including Donald Halstead were indicted on corruption charges. As V.C. Bird applied political pressure on the courts to secure convictions, Halstead left for the United States and would not return for eight years. The trial of Walter took place in early 1979. He was found guilty on a single charge of not paying import duties on a steel frame for a private printing office and sentenced to eight years in prison, exactly the sentence V.C. Bird had called for in a public speech. After five months in prison, Walter was released on bail pending appeal.

The PLM divided over whether to reaffirm its confidence in Walter's leadership. Following a chaotic party meeting, and to the satisfaction of the Birds, Walter withdrew and Robert Hall became the new PLM leader. After a series of judicial delays, the Eastern Caribbean Court of Appeal overturned Walter's conviction, stating that the prosecution had not proved that he had



“acted from any fraudulent or oblique motive” and calling the verdict against him “unsafe and unsatisfactory.” Conveniently for the ALP, the court’s decision did not come until four days after the April 24, 1980, elections, so Walter was effectively barred from standing for reelection in his constituency.

The Bird government then went after the AWU, gutting job protection regulations and implementing what the Canadian Labour Congress called “the worst anti-union legislation in the whole of the British Commonwealth.” The government also strengthened the 1972 Public Order Act—which it had called “despotic” when implemented by Walter—to circumscribe opposition activities. For example, private indoor meetings would now require police permission. Libel laws under the Act were tightened so that “the truth of the matter shall not amount to a defence.” Under the new restrictions Tim Hector would be arrested 11 times between 1978 and 1987. In one case in which the government obtained a conviction, the ruling was overturned by the Privy Council in London on the grounds that the Public Order Act was “unconstitutional” as well as “insidious and objectionable.”

The restrictive labor legislation sparked workplace disputes and AWU demonstrations. The government responded by beefing up the Antigua and Barbuda Defense Force, a roughly 100-member professional military created by V.C. Bird in 1967, and sending heavily armed soldiers to suppress marches and harass workers. Some AWU workers were so intimidated that they switched over to the ATLU, which after 1976 had reestablished its control over government jobs. Others, amid mass dismissals, simply left the country. The AWU protested to the International Labor Organization (ILO), which concluded after a 1978 fact-finding mission that AWU members were being systematically victimized by the ALP government.

In 1979 the government’s authoritarian drive became even more pronounced when the independent Antigua Union of Teachers (AUT) went on strike to protest what it alleged was the illegal dismissal of the union president and a dozen or so other teachers. Police responded with tear gas and fired their weapons at AWU headquarters, where teachers had run for cover. Months later a High Court judge ruled that the teachers had been unjustly fired and ordered that they be reinstated. The Court of Appeal subsequently upheld the ruling, but the government ignored it and two decades later the teachers still have not been given back their jobs.

### ***Independence and the Perpetuation of Bird Rule***

As the Bird government worked to undermine any and all opposition, it had less success in stimulating the economy. Despite efforts to expand tourism and promote small manufacturing, unemployment climbed above 20 percent in 1979. V.C. Bird therefore made the quest for independence a principal plank of the ALP’s 1980 election campaign. Riding a crest of nationalism, making generous

use of government resources, and with the PLM severely weakened because of the absence of Walter and Halstead, the ALP won 13 of 17 seats. The Bird government then set about writing a new constitution and ignored opposition demands that worker rights and press freedoms be clearly spelled out. It also rejected a proposal for the establishment of a fully independent electoral commission.

Antigua and Barbuda became independent on November 1, 1981, with the ALP hailing V.C. Bird as the father of the nation. Meanwhile, cracks in the PLM grew wider, with PLM leader Robert Hall increasingly at odds with George Walter and the AWU. Walter left the PLM and, with the backing of the AWU, formed the United People's Movement (UPM). Meanwhile, with the 1984 elections approaching, the ALP strengthened its position with some gerrymandering in St. Luke and All Saints in the center of Antigua. The two constituencies, traditionally PLM strongholds, were reconfigured into All Saints East and St. Luke, and All Saints West, with the latter covering mostly ALP territory.

With the added edge in All Saints West, and with the opposition divided between the PLM, the UPM, and Tim Hector's ACLM, the ALP swept all 16 seats on Antigua in the 1984 vote amid credible allegations of serious irregularities and police intimidation. Independent Eric Burton won the Barbuda seat and became the official opposition leader in parliament.

During the 1980s the Bird government borrowed heavily and spent freely on tourism-related infrastructure and imports. By the early 1990s, nearly three-quarters of the nation's GDP was based on tourism. In effect, the V.C. Bird government had completed the transformation from single-sector dependency on sugar to single-sector dependency on tourism. And, as was the case with sugar, the tourism industry would in large part be foreign owned or operated. At the same time, the nation's import bill nearly doubled in less than 10 years and the national debt soared. By the early 1990s, about 80 percent of all tourism earnings flowed back out of the country to pay for food, services, equipment, construction materials, and manufactured goods, while per capita debt climbed to one of the highest in the world, around \$400 million for a nation of a little more than 60,000.

Tourism generated substantial new employment opportunities, but not enough to fully offset the loss of jobs in agriculture and manufacturing. Although per capita income had risen from \$1,000 to about \$3,000 during the 1980s, by the early 1990s unemployment remained in the 20-percent range and would have been substantially higher but for the increasing rate of emigration. During the 1980s and early 1990s up to 30,000 Antiguan and Barbudans applied for visas to go to the United States. Unemployment and emigration, however, did not hinder the Bird government's efforts to fortify its political base through co-optation of much of private sector, patronage, and control of government jobs. At least 40 percent of the workforce remained on the

government payroll (about the same as today), and in the run-up to the 1989 elections, public sector workers were plied with a 25 percent raise hike.

The opposition remained weak despite efforts toward greater unity. George Walter retired from politics in 1985, the same year the National Democratic Party (NDP) was founded under the leadership of Ivor Heath, a medical doctor. The NDP subsequently merged with the UPM to form the United National Democratic Party (UNDP), with Heath as leader. In the 1989 elections the UNDP fielded a full slate of candidates, including Donald Halstead, who had returned from the United States, while the ACLM ran 12.

Both parties went after the ALP and the Birds on corruption issues and criticized the ALP's influence over the Office of the Supervisor of Elections. But they could not compete with the ALP machine, its excessive use of state resources, and its grip on the public and private broadcast media. The ALP won 15 of 16 seats on Antigua, losing only to the UNDP's Baldwin Spencer, an Oxford-educated labor activist and leader of the AWU. Spencer became the opposition leader in parliament and eventually succeeded Heath as leader of the UNDP. The Barbuda seat was won by Hilbourne Frank, a staunch foe of the ALP and leader of the Barbuda People's Movement (BPM), which advocated greater autonomy for Barbuda.

The 1989 elections were marked by widespread allegations of irregularities, vote tampering, bribery, and police intimidation. The late arrival of ballots caused five-hour delays in 10 of the 17 constituencies. In response to a petition filed by the UNDP, the High Court annulled the results in one constituency. Before it could rule on petitions filed in six other constituencies, the ALP parliamentary members holding those seats resigned and the Bird government announced that by-elections would be held. The UNDP demanded that the government first carry out electoral reforms, including the formation of an independent elections commission. When it did not, the UNDP boycotted the by-elections and the ALP retained its 15-2 majority in parliament.

### ***Systemic Corruption***

A series of corruption scandals, beginning in the late 1970s and continuing into the 1990s, show that under V.C. Bird and sons rule has been based more on the arbitrary exercise of power and abuse of authority than on law. The 1981 constitution as well as a number of court rulings have consistently been disregarded, the findings of official commissions of inquiry have been kept under wraps and/or ignored, and no government official has ever been held legally accountable despite strong evidence of corrupt activities.

Space Research Corporation. In the late 1970s the Bird government allowed millions of dollars worth of weaponry to be moved through Antigua to white-ruled South Africa in contravention of a United Nations arms embargo. The arms were shipped by Space Research Corporation, a Canadian-American

company run by artillery wizard Gerald Bull. In exchange, the Bird government received cash payments as well as outfitting and training for the Antigua and Barbuda Defense Force. The defense force increasingly would be deployed to suppress opposition marches and demonstrations, and it was used to militarize the port area when AWU longshoreman refused to handle Space Research cargo following exposure of the arms shipments by Tim Hector in *Outlet*. AWU workers were forced off the docks at gunpoint and during subsequent protests they were teargassed.

The law firm of Bird and Bird was the legal representative for Space Research in Antigua and Barbuda and Lester Bird was the company's principal spokesperson. In April 1978 Lester denied in parliament that arms were being shipped through the country to South Africa and threatened to have anyone making such an allegation tried for treason. Seven months later, when conclusive evidence was revealed in the international media that Antigua and Barbuda had been used to import, test, and ship arms to the apartheid regime in South Africa, V.C. Bird was forced to concede publicly that such was the case. He tried to suggest that Antigua and Barbuda was not the only Caribbean country involved in such activities, but provided no evidence to back his claim and none ever emerged.

A U.S. federal grand jury indicted Bull and he pleaded guilty to selling more than \$30 million worth of arms to South Africa. According to a number of press reports at the time, evidence presented to the grand jury showed that Space Research passed at least \$200,000 to high-level government officials in Antigua and Barbuda. However, despite opposition demands, there was no official inquiry and no one in Antigua was charged with any crime. In 1979 V.C. Bird praised Space Research in parliament for helping to strengthen the defense force and said that the government's relationship with the company was not a mistake, that he'd do it again. Meanwhile, the local printing company in Antigua, under government pressure, refused to continue printing *Outlet* and the newspaper would remain closed until 1980 when it was able to acquire its own printing press.

Robert Vesco. In 1981 the Bird government gave sanctuary to fugitive American financier Robert Vesco for six months after he had fled the Bahamas under U.S. pressure to have him deported. The government issued him an Antiguan passport under a different name and provided a new registration for his yacht. In exchange, Vesco made monthly cash payments to the government through Lester Bird. According to U.S. government sources quoted by Robert Coram, a reporter for the *Atlanta Constitution*, when the United States became aware of Vesco's presence on Antigua and asked for his arrest and extradition, Lester Bird tipped off Vesco so that he could make his escape, first to Costa Rica and then to Cuba.

The Airport Scandal. In 1985 Vere Bird, Jr., appointed by his father as minister of public utilities and aviation, oversaw the resurfacing of the runway

at V.C. Bird International Airport. The project was carried out by a French company through a French consulting firm under a contract with the Bird government signed by Vere Jr. Originally estimated at \$1 million, the project's eventual costs were \$11.1 million, including \$1.3 million in fees paid by the government to the French consulting firm, and another \$1.1 million for the purchase of concrete and gravel from a company controlled by Lester.

Within months of the completion of the project, it was revealed by the French media that the French construction company was bankrupt and had already been in liquidation when the airport resurfacing was being negotiated. It was then revealed by *Outlet* that the consulting firm was not French, but was actually an Antiguan company owned by Vere Jr. and represented by the law firm of Bird and Bird. *Outlet* also showed that cabinet minutes had been altered to indicate full cabinet approval of the project, when in reality it had been approved solely by Vere Jr.

In response to criticism from other cabinet members, V.C. Bird defended his oldest son by saying that he had only done what other ministers were used to doing and that they were upset only because they had not been included in the project. His statements heightened public protests and V.C. finally agreed to an official inquiry by a West Indian jurist. However, he denied the investigator the power of subpoena and the authority to take sworn testimony. To date, the results of the inquiry have never been made public but for a single passage which says that in the absence of evidence that may have been deliberately withheld, there were no grounds for criminal prosecution.

Roydan Farm. In 1984 Vere Bird, Jr. promised Maurice Sarfati, a Miami-based Israeli national, substantial acreage and an array of concessions to operate a melon farm. The concessions included exemptions from income and property taxes and import and customs duties, the approval of assorted licenses, and access to scarce water. The cabinet initially questioned the project, but in 1985 approved it after Vere Jr. referred to a feasibility study which eventually turned out to be nonexistent. Vere Jr. then arranged for Sarfati's appointment as Special Envoy in the Ministry of Economic Development. As reported by Coram, Sarfati's secretary would later testify that on a number of occasions she delivered checks of \$5,000 to Vere Jr. and on one occasion a check for \$20,000 to his wife.

By 1987 Roydan Farm was failing despite a \$1.3 million loan from the U.S. Overseas Private Investment Corporation. Minister of Agriculture Hilroy Humphreys then signed a contract in which the Bird government guaranteed Roydan Farm a line of credit for up to \$20 million. As determined by an official inquiry years later, Humphreys subsequently signed and issued to Roydan Farm seven promissory notes and zero coupon bonds in the total amount of EC\$4 million. He did so without obtaining the approval of the cabinet or the finance ministry, as required by law. In exchange, Humphreys received thousands of dollars in bribes from Roydan Farm.

In January 1988 Vere Jr. wrote a laudatory letter of reference for Sarfati on government stationary. A few weeks later Roydan Farm went under. It was not until Sarfati was implicated in a subsequent arms scandal in 1990—described below—that the Bird government authorized an inquiry into Roydan Farm by the Washington, D.C., law firm of Washington, Perito and Dubuc. Again, the government did not grant the firm's investigators the power to subpoena. Still, they uncovered overwhelming evidence of malfeasance and bribery, and recommended that the government refer the case of Humphreys to the director of public prosecutions. The government ignored the recommendation. The results of the inquiry have never been officially released, but copies of the report eventually leaked. Humphreys has since headed ministries in successive ALP governments. Following the 1999 elections, Prime Minister Lester Bird again appointed Humphreys, this time as minister of trade and industry.

Arms to the Medellín Drug Cartel. In April 1990 the government of Colombia charged that Israeli arms had been sold to the government of Antigua and Barbuda, then secretly shipped to the Medellín drug cartel, which at the time was conducting a reign of terror against the Colombian establishment. Colombian authorities confirmed that the Galil assault rifle used to assassinate leading presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán in August 1989 came from a cache of weapons delivered from Antigua to the cartel. After repeatedly denying that anyone in his government was involved, V.C. Bird, under mounting international pressure, finally agreed to an independent inquiry headed by prominent British jurist Louis Blom-Cooper.

Blom-Cooper found that Vere Jr. and Lt. Col. Clyde Walker, chief of the Antigua and Barbuda Defense Force, had in 1989 conspired with Maurice Sarfati and two former high-ranking Israeli military officers involved in Israeli arms sales to clandestinely acquire weapons for an illegal training school in Antigua and then ship them to Medellín cartel leader José Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha. The end-user certificate, attesting that 400 Galil rifles and 100 Uzi submachine guns would be used solely by the Antigua and Barbuda Defense Force, was signed by Vere Jr. Blom-Cooper wrote in his report, "I entertain no doubt that Mr. Vere Bird, Jr., was paid by, or at least with, money emanating from Señor Rodríguez Gacha, for the services rendered to the arms transshipment."

Blom-Cooper also noted that Sarfati had been appointed a Special Envoy—a status he utilized in orchestrating the original purchase of arms from Israel—without authorization of the Antiguan governor-general, "another instance of the failure of government to observe the rule of law."

Regarding denials by Vere Jr., Blom-Cooper wrote, "I found his answers to questions evasive, irrelevant, or plain lies," and that he was a "thoroughly unprincipled man." He recommended that Vere Jr. never again hold ministerial office and that Lt. Col. Walker be fired forthwith. He also suggested that the

activities of Vere Jr. warranted further inquiries and that when his bank accounts were fully examined Vere Jr. could face civil proceedings for the recovery of ill-gotten gains. Blom-Cooper concluded that Antigua and Barbuda was in “the grip of persons who use political power as a passport to private profit” and faced being “engulfed in corruption.”

Vere Jr. ultimately was removed from the cabinet, but remained a member of parliament and a close advisor to his father. No further inquiry was made into his financial dealings, nor were there any civil proceedings. Vere Jr. was reelected as an ALP member of parliament in 1994 and 1999. Following the 1999 elections, Prime Minister Lester Bird named him minister of agriculture.

As in the case of Vere Jr., Lt. Col. Walker has never been held accountable in a court of law for his role in the arms transshipments. He was allowed to resign with full pay and subsequently became an aide to the governor-general. Most recently, he was appointed Chief of Immigration by the Lester Bird government. In the end, V.C. Bird never officially released the 249-page Blom-Cooper report, despite a publicly stated commitment to do so. Opposition party members eventually obtained a copy and it was later published.

## **Lester Bird Takes the Helm**

In the late 1980s, as V.C. Bird approached his eightieth birthday, the question was whether he would be succeeded by Vere Jr. or Lester. Most Antiguan believed V.C. was partial to Vere Jr. because he had always doted on him and staunchly defended him from one scandal to the next. V.C. seemed less comfortable with Lester, but Lester’s ambition to become prime minister was evident to all and it was generally expected that he would fight for the job.

It therefore was not surprising when Lester seized the opportunity of the Medellín arms scandal to work at eliminating Vere Jr. from contention. He publicly condemned his brother’s role, demanded that he be dismissed from the government, and, when V.C. continued to defend Vere Jr., refused to attend cabinet meetings until a commission of inquiry was established. Lester also contracted, in his capacity as foreign minister, a former U.S. federal prosecutor who went to Israel and tracked down the end-user certificate, one of the key pieces of evidence against Vere Jr. in the Blom-Cooper report.

The arms scandal galvanized the political opposition as several thousand people turned out for a protest march in May 1990. The Antigua Christian Council of Churches issued a pastoral letter which stated that the nation was in a “crisis born of greed and selfishness.” However, despite friction in the ALP between Lester’s backers and supporters of Vere Jr., the party turned aside a no-confidence proposal in parliament by opposition leader Baldwin Spencer and ignored calls by the Antigua Chamber of Commerce that the entire V.C. Bird

government resign. Since independence, the ALP has been renowned for its ability to surmount internal divisions and circle the wagons when its power is threatened. Party figures remember well how V.C. Bird went after George Walter and Donald Halstead following the ALP's return to power in 1976, and fear nothing more than the possibility of retribution if the opposition were ever to return to power.

When V.C. Bird continued to ignore Blom-Cooper's recommendations regarding anti-corruption legislation and administrative reforms, opposition parties in 1991 again took to the streets in a series of large demonstrations. V.C. ignored them until Lester resigned from the government and actually joined in some of the opposition protests. Antiguanus were stunned at first, but in retrospect many came to believe that Lester's move had been a ploy. He knew that his father and Vere Jr. were no less close than before the arms scandal and it seemed that Lester was angling yet again for an edge in the succession battle. By leaving government amid an economic downturn, Lester may have been trying to convince his father that he was indispensable. Whatever his motivation, within months of resigning Lester met with V.C. and was brought back into the cabinet with a mandate, Lester said, to "devise and lead a political and economic recovery program."

In January 1992 V.C. himself was caught misappropriating public funds, sparking a new round of protests. As revealed by *Outlet*, the prime minister had approved a \$25,000 payment to a woman for medical expenses in the United States, but the money had ended up in his own personal bank account. When demonstrators picketed parliament, V.C. ordered the police to attack with rubber bullets and tear gas. Soon after, the UNDP, the ACLM, and the remnants of the PLM united to form the United Progressive Party (UPP), with Baldwin Spencer as leader and Tim Hector as deputy leader. Following a UPP-led national strike in March 1992 and the largest opposition protests ever seen on Antigua, V.C. Bird announced that he would not run in the next elections due by 1994.

That set off a campaign for party leadership which culminated in a vote at the ALP convention two months later. The two principal contenders were Lester and Information Minister John St. Luce. V.C. Bird, having finally concluded that Vere Jr. was too tainted by the arms scandal, backed Lester. When Vere Jr. supported St. Luce, Lester charged that St. Luce had promised Vere Jr. a senior cabinet post. St. Luce denied that and attempted to portray himself as a cleaner alternative to the Birds. But St. Luce himself had been finance minister for much of the post-independence period during which the constitutional requirement for an annual public audit of government expenditures had been flouted.

The delegate vote at the convention ended in an improbable tie, with Lester and St. Luce both receiving 150 votes. V.C. would remain in charge until a rematch. Lester, who had seized every opportunity to undermine Vere Jr.



since the late 1980s, determined that he could not defeat St. Luce without his brother's support. Prior to the September 1993 convention Lester cut a deal with his brother. In exchange for the decisive backing of delegates controlled by Vere Jr., Lester helped Vere Jr. obtain the ALP chairmanship.

After defeating St. Luce for the party leadership, and with his sights on the 1994 elections, Lester portrayed himself as an anti-corruption reformer. But his handling of yet another scandal suggested that business would be as usual. In late 1993 Hilroy Humphreys, who had retained his post as agriculture minister following the Roydan Farm scandal, was found in contempt of court by a High Court judge for helping a company with links to a number of government ministers, including Lester, to mine sand in an area of Barbuda where the court had forbidden such activity. Humphreys was sentenced to a month in jail, but was pardoned by Governor-General James Carlyle at the behest of Lester. The UPP argued to no avail that under Article 84 of the 1981 constitution the governor-general has the authority to pardon someone only in criminal matters, not in civil cases involving contempt-of-court findings. When Lester became prime minister in 1994, he appointed Humphreys as minister of health.

### ***The 1994 Elections***

In 1993 the UPP again stepped up its demands for electoral reform and access to the nation's broadcast media, all of which remained either in the hands of the Bird family or were controlled by the ALP government. The UPP called for international observers, including the Atlanta-based Carter Center, to monitor the vote. Lester, assisted by a team of public relations specialists hired from around the Caribbean and the United States, countered by scheming to mislead the public and the international community regarding the legitimacy of the country's electoral process.

Lester began by inviting the Organization of American States (OAS) to assess the electoral system. In November 1993 two OAS electoral specialists came to Antigua and made a series of recommendations, including an overhaul of the voter registry which had not been purged of people who had died or moved away since 1975. The recommendations were given to Lester and Patrick Lewis, who at that time was Antigua and Barbuda's ambassador to the United States and the OAS. They were not forwarded to the supervisor of elections, Richard John, nor was the OAS invited to return prior to the vote to confirm whether its recommendations were carried out.

The day before the March 8, 1994, elections, an OAS press release was issued stating that Antigua and Barbuda had put in place electoral reforms recommended by the OAS to minimize the possibility of irregularities. The statement, which was reported by Caribbean media outlets, was false. In effect, it was a statement of the Antigua and Barbuda government as made by

Ambassador Lewis. It was given credence in the regional media because it appeared on official OAS letterhead.

Lester and his team also falsely gave the impression that the Carter Center had endorsed the electoral system. The Carter Center does not monitor elections without the cooperation of a sitting government, and in 1993 when it inquired of the Antigua and Barbuda government about observing the elections, it was rebuffed. Then, a month before the elections, Dennis Smith, a Barbadian elections expert who had worked with the Carter Center observing elections in Haiti and Guyana, was approached by Hartley Henry, one of Lester's public relations advisors. Henry is a Barbadian who had done public relations work for Vere Jr. during the 1990 arms scandal. He hired Smith as a government consultant to assess the electoral system in Antigua and Barbuda. Smith's terms of reference made it clear that his work in Antigua and Barbuda was totally independent of the Carter Center.

Nonetheless, Lester stated at a public meeting in Antigua that the Carter Center would be observing the elections. The ALP-controlled broadcast media, particularly ZDK Radio run by Vere Jr., repeatedly associated Smith's presence in Antigua with the Carter Center. The result was that a number of Caribbean media outlets reported that the Antigua and Barbuda government had not only put in place OAS recommendations, but that the Carter Center was observing the vote. Lester continued to mislead after the elections. In an interview with the New York-based *Carib News* (March 22, 1994), he backed up his assertion that the elections were free and fair by stating that Smith had been part of a Carter Center observer mission in Antigua and Barbuda.

The reality was that the 1994 elections could not be judged free or fair because (1) the electoral law allowed the ruling party to abuse the power of incumbency with impunity and without limit, (2) the ALP dominated the broadcast media to the exclusion of the opposition, (3) the balloting system did not guarantee a secret ballot, (4) the voter registration process was deficient and open to manipulation by the ALP, and (5) the voter registry was inflated by up to 25 percent with names of people who had died or left the country.

With the deck stacked against it, the UPP nonetheless conducted the best organized campaign by an opposition party since the PLM victory in 1971. Its slogan, "Ready to Govern—Putting People First," its moderately social democratic platform, and its stated commitment to a constitutional rule of law and good governance appealed to a significant portion of the voting public. Shut out of the broadcast media, the UPP relied on public meetings to disseminate its message. It was supported by *Outlet*, which continued to endure despite continuing intimidation and a barrage of libel suits by government officials, and by the *Daily Observer*, a 12-page publication newly founded by the UPP-linked Derrick family.

Based on privately conducted polls, Lester and the ALP realized the UPP was picking up momentum. Lester, having initially emphasized increased social

spending, shifted to projecting himself as an agent of modernization, while predicting that a UPP victory would mean a return to the economic difficulties when the PLM was in power in the early 1970s. At the same time, the ALP went on a spending spree, freely utilizing state resources as well as substantial financing from domestic and foreign investors who over the years have enjoyed mutually beneficial, sweetheart business relations with members of the Bird family and other ALP officials.

Although operating at a disadvantage, the UPP in 1994 substantially improved upon the opposition's performance in the previous elections. The party won five seats, up from the single seat won by Baldwin Spencer in 1989, while Hilbourne Frank of the BPM retained his Barbuda seat, giving the opposition a total of six seats. The combined opposition vote rose from 32.6 percent in 1989 to 43.7 percent in 1994. The ALP saw its parliamentary majority decline from 15 seats to 11 seats, and its share of the popular vote from 63.5 percent to 54.4 percent. Given that the ALP beat the UPP by slim margins in three constituencies—St. George, St. John's Rural North, and All Saints West (the seat held by Hilroy Humphreys for more than decade)—it was conceivable that the UPP could have won a majority of seats in a free and fair vote.

The UPP decided not to contest the legitimacy of the elections in the courts, believing that the gains it had made constituted a moral victory and that it now had political momentum on its side. With a larger presence in parliament, it aimed to prove that it could offer a viable alternative to the Bird dynasty. The UPP also felt that the victory of Donald Halstead in St. John's City West was evidence that the taint of the old PLM government was wearing off.

### ***Lester Bird's First Term***

Lester took office with the government in arrears on much of the spiraling foreign debt, a mounting budget deficit, and a downturn in the tourist industry. In early 1995 he implemented a structural adjustment program which included assorted tax and tariff increases and sharp cuts in spending on health, education, and basic infrastructure. He did not institute personal income taxes, abolished decades ago with great fanfare by V.C. Bird, and few government employees were laid off. The public sector continued to account for about 40 percent of the work force and, as an engine of patronage, remained a fundamental pillar of ALP control.

Having been promised increased social spending, Antiguaners were angered and many participated in labor actions and street protests. The government did not relent and the subsequent deterioration of schools, medical facilities, and services has been obvious. In 1998 and 1999, the *Associated Press* and other wire services reported that in a country where some hotel rooms in beachfront enclaves go for as much as \$2,000 per night, many streets were open sewers, schools and roads were in disrepair, the government-run hospital

lacked the most elemental equipment, medicines, and hygienic maintenance, and, as the government itself conceded, more than 40 percent of the nation's homes lacked toilets.

Lester also moved to renegotiate the foreign debt, a substantial portion of it incurred during development projects that he himself had overseen. For example, in his capacity as minister of tourism and of economic development in the 1980s, he had borrowed about \$43 million in German marks to build the Royal Antiguan Hotel, with the loan guaranteed by the Italian government. Due to currency fluctuations and grossly underestimated construction expenses, total costs rose to nearly \$100 million and the government was strapped with soaring interest payments. In 1990 *Outlet* published documents which revealed that it was actually Lester who owned the hotel, not the government. Lester responded that he was only holding the hotel in trust for the government. But no audit of the hotel's finances has ever been presented to parliament or the cabinet, as required by law for any government agency.

In 1998 the Italian government agreed to reschedule more than \$100 million in debt relating to the Royal Antiguan Hotel and other tourism developments. A similar agreement was reached with Japan. Prior to the 1999 elections, the government asserted that all of the nation's foreign debt had been restructured and that the government was current on all interest payments.

Even as debt was being restructured, the government kept borrowing, mostly at high commercial rates, with the total foreign debt climbing at a rate of about 10 percent annually and reaching \$466 million in 1997, according to the Caribbean Development Bank. Following further restructuring and write-offs, the Bank recently reported that the debt had dipped below \$400 million. But Clarvis Joseph, president of the small but increasingly vocal Antigua and Barbuda Chamber of Commerce does not trust that figure. He said in an interview that he believes the debt had reached about \$540 million by 1999, not much less than the nation's annual GDP. Meanwhile, in 1998/1999, according to official figures, the government was running a current-account deficit of nearly 15 percent, with about three-quarters of all expenditures earmarked for servicing the debt and paying public sector salaries and benefits.

Politically, Lester seemed aware that the 1994 elections marked a significant shift in the mood of the country. With the Blom-Cooper report still fresh in the minds of many, Lester did not appoint Vere Jr. to his cabinet. However, following in his father's footsteps, Lester continued to protect his brother from any legal accountability for his role in various scandals and, to date, Vere Jr. remains chairman of the ALP. Lester also appropriated much of the UPP's anti-corruption language and promised cleaner government. The 1994 ALP election manifesto vowed that within the first 180 days of its new term, the party would implement anti-corruption legislation, as recommended by Blom-Cooper. By the time of the 1999 elections no such legislation had been passed

and Lester's first term was marked by a number of scandals which indicated that impunity remained the order of the day.

In September 1994 the *Daily Observer* reported that Bill Cheung, Antigua and Barbuda's consul in Hong Kong, had in the early 1990s sold Antiguan passports and visas for as much as \$20,000 apiece to Chinese seeking to travel to the United States. The newspaper cited evidence that Cheung had done so with the written authorization of then foreign minister Lester Bird who, in 1989, had appointed Cheung as special economic envoy in Hong Kong. Lester denied any wrongdoing but in the face of opposition demands that he step down pending an official inquiry, he appointed retired High Court judge Horace L. Mitchell to look into the matter.

Mitchell produced what amounted to a legal opinion which asserted that while Lester had in fact authorized the issuance of such passports and visas, he had not acted out of personal favor or in contravention of Antiguan law. Acrobatically reaching for precedent, Mitchell noted that the United Nations had issued travel documents to Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka so that he could travel from Nigeria to France, and that if the United Nations could do it, a U.N. member state should be able to do it as well. Mitchell said he had determined that there had been no bribery or other wrongdoing involved in the issuance of the passports and visas. He based his conclusion solely upon an examination of "relevant files" in the foreign ministry, which was still under the control of Lester, who had kept that portfolio for himself after the 1994 elections. Bill Cheung, the key figure in the scandal, was not available to be interviewed by the judge because three days after the initial report in the *Daily Observer* Lester had suspended Cheung as consul and special envoy and barred him from Antigua and Barbuda.

In early 1995 Ivor Bird, Lester's and Vere Jr.'s younger brother, was arrested while trying to board a plane at Antigua's international airport with a briefcase containing 26 pounds of cocaine. The briefcase was tagged "ZDK Radio Antigua," the radio station owned by the Bird family. Not long before, U.S. drug enforcement agencies had publicly expressed concern about increasing evidence that Antiguan public officials were participating in or acquiescent to drug-related activities. In response, the government of Lester Bird had promised to crack down on the drug trade. Yet following a trial held in Antigua, Ivor was let off with a fine of \$75,000. The fine was paid by V.C. Bird who, along with Lester, helped arrange for a visa so that Ivor could live in the United States. In early 1999 Ivor was back in Antigua to support the ALP's reelection campaign.

In August 1996 *Outlet* and the *Daily Observer* reported that Finance Minister Molwyn Joseph had intervened with customs authorities on behalf of a friend to facilitate duty-free entry of a 1932 Rolls Royce car which once belonged to Robert Bradshaw, the late premier of St. Kitts-Nevis. The reports sparked mass protests, with one UPP-led demonstration attracting more than

10,000 people demanding that the government step down and call early elections. A number of UPP leaders were arrested on charges of disorderly conduct which were later dismissed. Following a hastily prepared report by the solicitor-general who said that Joseph had not abused his ministerial authority, the UPP called for a full public inquiry. With public pressure mounting, Lester dismissed Joseph as finance minister. No official inquiry or criminal proceedings were ever held and by 1998 Joseph was back in the cabinet, appointed by Lester as planning minister.

Following Hurricane Georges, which struck Antigua and Barbuda in September 1999, the UPP and *Outlet*, as well as many ordinary citizens, charged that the government was diverting substantial portions of international relief aid for the exclusive use of the ALP and its supporters. The opposition had already been concerned because Lester had named himself and four cabinet officials, including Molwyn Joseph and Hilroy Humphreys, as the five members of what purportedly was to be a nonpartisan reconstruction task force. Lester denied that relief supplies were being allocated based on political loyalty, or that ALP supporters were the first to have electricity and other services restored.

But allegations of unfair distribution and misuse of funds have been rife after each of the storms that have struck Antigua and Barbuda in recent years. For example, following Hurricane Luis in 1995, the UPP charged, and official statistics seemed to indicate, that the government drew substantial sums from the nation's social security fund for reconstruction, and that EC\$1 million had disappeared under Asot Michael, a businessman and close associate of Lester whom the prime minister had awarded a government contract to purchase building supplies. Lester denied that funds had been lost or stolen and stated, "I intend to make a full report to the people and account for everything." To date, no such report has been issued, and Michael would go on to become Lester's chief of staff and, in 1999, a member of the cabinet.

Lester and other government officials frequently complain that the corruption issue is blown out of proportion by political opponents. For example, when Molwyn Joseph exited the cabinet in 1996, Lester blamed the UPP and the two opposition newspapers, accusing them of "public lies, mischief-making, and false claims." But it is undeniable that since independence nearly 18 years ago, a public accounting of government finances and expenditures has been provided for only one year, 1983. Annual budget presentations lack supporting data and the only time citizens ever catch a glimpse of how government actually conducts business is when documents are leaked to the opposition press.

The failure to provide an accounting of government business not only heightens suspicion and sustains perceptions of official impunity, it is illegal. Article 97 of the 1981 constitution clearly states that a thorough audit of every government ministry, agency, and statutory body shall be presented to the parliament annually. In his 1998 budget presentation, Finance Minister John

St. Luce promised that at least four sets of annual audits would finally be made available by the end of that year. It never happened. Which means that when it comes to one of its most fundamental responsibilities—the management of the people’s purse—the Lester Bird government, like that of his father, continues to operate beyond the law.

## **Deficient Electoral System**

In the 1999 campaign the UPP focused on corruption, and the party’s promise of accountable government already seemed to be resonating at well-attended public meetings in 1998. The question was whether the UPP would yet again be at a disadvantage because of a deficient electoral system.

During the 1989 elections there were numerous allegations of double-voting, impostors voting in the place of people who had died or migrated but whose names were still on the voter registry, as well as charges that the names of eligible voters had been removed from the list. In response to opposition petitions, a High Court judge annulled the vote in one constituency and Keithley Hill, the supervisor of elections at that time, strongly recommended in his report to Prime Minister V.C. Bird that there be a complete re-registration of the voting-age population. That recommendation was ignored.

Following the 1994 vote, Supervisor of Elections Richard John, appointed by the V.C. Bird government in 1992, seconded his predecessor on the need for re-registration, and made 10 other recommendations, including the establishment of an independent electoral commission which would include members of the opposition, and the use of voter identification cards. By 1998 the government had done nothing, despite Lester’s public commitment in 1994 to carry out electoral reforms once he had taken office.

In June 1998, as the UPP reiterated its demand for international election monitors, Lester finally agreed to meet with UPP leader Baldwin Spencer and Richard John. All three were interviewed in March 1999 for this report. The prime minister said that John informed those in attendance that there was not enough time to conduct a re-registration before the next vote. According to John, “What I said was that it should have been carried out the year before.” The prime minister also alleged that the UPP was the party responsible for any delays. Spencer’s response: “We have been on record every year for more than a decade, in the media, in parliament, and in my letters to the prime minister himself, proposing re-registration and electoral reforms. One can only conclude that the reason we’re having yet another election with a bloated, easy-to-manipulate voter list is because the ruling party wants it that way.”

At that meeting Lester made a single concession. In previous elections, each ballot had a number printed on it which corresponded to the number on

the ballot paper counterfoil which was kept by electoral officers. Poll workers wrote each voter's registration number on the counterfoil, which completely undermined the sanctity of the vote. It was as if the government wanted voters to realize that it could readily know how they had voted, a chilling signal to anyone on the public payroll or otherwise beholden to the ALP who might have considered voting for the opposition. Lester agreed that poll workers would no longer be required to write the voter registration numbers on the ballot counterfoil.

The June 1998 meeting was held just prior to the annual voter registration. By law, new voters can only sign up during the first week in July, the shortest registration period in the Caribbean and possibly anywhere. It effectively disenfranchises young people who turn 18 after July and those who are away from Antigua and Barbuda because they are working at overseas jobs or pursuing higher education. The opposition has long demanded that the period be lengthened and Supervisor of Elections John made that recommendation in his 1994 elections report. But successive ALP governments have rejected the notion, evidently because the party's base of support, particularly in this decade, tends to be older, and because disaffection with ALP rule has been most pronounced among youth.

### ***The Foreign Voter Question***

During the seven-day registration period in July 1998, 5,652 new names were added to the voter registry, nearly as many as had been added in the three previous years combined. That brought the total number registered to 53,941, equivalent to about 80 percent of the population. Following legal challenges by opposition parties, the list was eventually trimmed to 52,385. Even if one goes by the highest national population estimate, 69,000, and given that at least a third of the population is below voting age, the final list still must have been inflated by up to 25 percent with names of people who had died, migrated, or, as the opposition and civic groups alleged, people of foreign origin not legally entitled to vote.

In recent years Antigua and Barbuda has seen a steady influx of people—in the low thousands annually—from around the Caribbean, particularly Guyana, Jamaica, and the Dominican Republic. They have come seeking work and have been welcomed by the government, evidently because they will work cheaper than Antiguan and Barbudans, a selling point for attracting foreign investors. As early as 1994 the IMF determined that about a quarter of the workforce was made up of immigrant workers, including substantial numbers who had overstayed the term of their work permits or never had legal status to begin with.

The UPP and the small Antigua Freedom Party (AFP), led by Rick James, head of the Free and Fair Election League, alleged that the ALP had pressured



thousands of non-nationals to register and to vote for the ALP under threat of job loss or deportation. The Chamber of Commerce's Clarvis Joseph said to the *Los Angeles Times* that "elements of the ruling party have been seeking to activate the new immigrant vote, using threats like, 'If you don't vote for us, we'll kick you out' or 'If the opposition wins, they'll kick you out'." Suspicions were heightened when the government announced in late July that it was granting amnesty to non-nationals living in the country illegally prior to June 30, 1998, the day before the seven-day registration period began. Lester denied the allegations, stating that under the 1975 electoral law any alien granted legal residency would not be eligible to register until he or she had lived in the country for at least three years.

In August the opposition prepared to challenge the registration list on the grounds that, under the electoral law, naturalized citizens of Antigua and Barbuda not born in Commonwealth countries—for example, the Dominican Republic—are not eligible to vote, and that the list included the names of substantial numbers of such people. The government got wind of the strategy and just as opposition lawyers went to court, amended the law to eliminate the requirement retroactive to November 1, 1981, the day the country became independent. That meant that the presence of people on the voter registry who were in fact ineligible because they were not born in a Commonwealth country could no longer be challenged.

Lester stated that the law was changed because it was "unfair." It was a valid argument in the sense that naturalized citizens should have the right to vote regardless of where they were born. But then why did the ALP, in power since 1976, wait 22 years to amend the law, unless, as the opposition was about to argue in court, the ALP had indeed illegally effected the registration of substantial naturalized citizens from the Dominican Republic or other non-Commonwealth countries. The opposition would eventually lose its challenge, but Antiguan and Barbudans cannot be faulted for believing that the ALP used retroactive legislation to eliminate its legal liability for the registration of ineligible voters.

### ***Ruling Party Influence and Interference***

Following publication of the voter lists in each constituency, opposition parties were able to show before electoral revision tribunals that a significant number of names should be removed. In the prime minister's constituency of St. John's Rural East alone, the Free and Fair Election League objected to about 700 names. Some eventually were removed but, as in the other constituencies, most were allowed to remain. Part of the reason was that pliant revision courts consistently embraced the arguments of government lawyers that the burden of proof of eligibility does not rest with the person being challenged. If a name is challenged, that person does not even have to appear in court with the

necessary documentation he or she purportedly presented to voter registration officials to prove eligibility.

Moreover, although the chief registration officer in each constituency is a year-round, salaried employee and is mandated to eliminate names of people who are or have become ineligible, most make little effort to do so. For example, a number of the known cases of double-voting in the last three elections involved people who had moved and registered to vote in a new constituency, but still were able to vote in their old constituency because their names had not been removed from the list. Supervisor of Elections John said that because the government did not provide his office with sufficient resources, his staff did not have the software necessary to spot cases of double registration in the computerized lists. He also reminded that the government had failed to act on his recommendation in 1994 that voter identification cards be introduced to guard against double-voting and impersonation.

Finally, there is the question of the identity of the electoral officials who carry out voter registration and conduct the voting on election day. Antigua and Barbuda is a tiny country in which people know who each other are, and the general perception is that the electoral system is riddled with ALP activists, their family members, and civil servants beholden to the party. For example, in St. John's Rural East, the chief registration official in 1998 was Edward Dowdie, the ALP chairman in that constituency. His dual role and the similar conflicts of interest of electoral officers in other constituencies created widespread distrust and lent credence to allegations that the registration system was indeed subverted, that officials were disregarding the law to register ineligible voters when it was to the advantage of, or under instructions from, the ruling party. Just prior to the vote in 1999, the Antigua Christian Council of Churches and the United Evangelical Association even issued a statement in which they appealed to "those who are not legally qualified to be registered—but whose names appear on the voters' list—to desist from voting."

The electoral law states that "no person who has been employed by or on behalf of a candidate in or about the election" can be appointed as a presiding officer or polling clerk. But in election after election people connected with the ALP keep showing up as polling station officials. For example, in 1999 two of Edward Dowdie's daughters were presiding officers at stations in St. John's Rural East, while well-known ALP activists Nalda Charles, Yvonne McKay, and Lincoln Stanislaus were presiding officers in St. John's Rural West. In speaking to voters in other constituencies, and after going over the list of election officials with both UPP and ALP supporters, this writer found that those were not isolated cases.

Supervisor of Elections John was able to remove a few of the more blatantly compromised electoral officials prior to the 1999 vote, but his authority vis-à-vis the ruling party which appointed him in 1992 seemed limited. He agreed that a further revision of the roster of election officials was needed but

added, as per his 1994 recommendations, that an electoral commission which included opposition members could best carry out such a task.

## **Uneven Playing Field**

Ronald Sanders is Antigua and Barbuda's high commissioner to London and is generally seen as one of Lester Bird's closest political advisors. In May 1996 he wrote a confidential memo to the prime minister in which he assessed the results of the 1994 elections and the ALP's prospects for 1999. The memo was leaked, disseminated by the opposition press, and eventually was confirmed as authentic by both Sanders and the prime minister.

Sanders provided a straightforward, tightly argued appraisal of the political landscape and was quite revealing about the inner workings of the ALP regime. He stated that the swing against the ALP in 1994 "was very significant," and that the party had lost ground because of people's concerns about widespread official corruption, divisions with the ruling party, and the party's long hold on power. He believed those concerns had actually intensified since Lester had taken office, and that the structural adjustment program was exacting further political costs.

Sanders also depicted a government in which officials competed for spoils, made alliances with "interests outside the party and government," and at the same time provided information and documents to the opposition press to gain advantage during turf battles and to ensure their own "personal stake." In essence, he was describing a level of systemic corruption which, he said, threatened to "further weaken the Government and Party." He urged that the government fulfill its 1994 campaign pledge to implement anti-corruption legislation because "it will have significant appeal." He also advocated a more "virulent" approach toward the opposition press. And, in recommending that the government "use its influence with the Courts to appoint a special judge to speed up libel and other related matters," he in effect acknowledged that the judicial system in Antigua and Barbuda is less than independent.

Neither of those two recommendations were acted upon. But a year later the ALP hired Virginia-based Laszlo and Associates to gauge the actual level of discontent with the ruling party. Laszlo and Associates worked on the successful 1995 campaign of Prime Minister Basdeo Panday and the United National Congress (UNC) in Trinidad and Tobago, and for the opposition Unity Labour Party (ULP) which lost the 1998 elections in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. According to Lester, a Laszlo team surveyed 1,500 people and found that the ALP had the solid backing of 38-40 percent, which happens to correspond to the percentage of the workforce on the public payroll, the ALP's principal support base. The survey showed that close to 30 percent were

strongly behind the UPP, and that many of the nearly one-third undecideds were young people, a sector of the population which Ronald Sanders said posed a threat to the ALP.

To win over the undecideds, reel in disaffected youth, and solidify its traditional support, the ALP went on a spending spree that exceeded the party's substantial expenditures in 1994, as even Lester would eventually concede. Moreover, as in previous elections, the ALP relied heavily on the use of state resources and its control over the nation's broadcast media. Regarding the sources of the ALP's funding, Lester said in an interview that, "We have raised money from local and foreign business people who believe that if the ALP is removed it will set back their investments." In Antigua and Barbuda, as in most of the Caribbean, there are no campaign-financing regulations or public disclosure laws. But it is no secret who the ruling party's principal benefactors are.

### ***The ALP's Main Backers***

Among the oldest and most influential supporters of the ruling party are the Hadeeds, a Syrian family which has lived on Antigua for more than 40 years. The family has supported the ALP for decades, and reportedly has loaned ALP governments substantial sums of money to pay bills and meet the public payroll, something which is difficult to confirm because of the ALP's refusal to carry out a public audit of government business. Over the years the Hadeeds have become extraordinarily wealthy and the Hadeed Group now ranges over car dealerships, petroleum products, electronics assembly, financial institutions, construction, and tourism development, as well as ownership of the Antigua Power company which provides the country's electricity supply. The group recently was given the principal contract to build a new government office complex. The current head of the Hadeed Group, Aziz Hadeed, was named an ALP senator by Lester in 1994 and is chairman of LIAT, the regional Caribbean airline which is majority-owned by the Hadeed Group and the government of Antigua and Barbuda. His brother, Ramez, concentrates on finance and is Antigua and Barbuda's ambassador to the Middle East.

Bruce Rappaport is a Palestine-born Jew and international oil trader to whom Lester sold a majority interest in the government-owned refinery in 1982. The sale was not approved by parliament, as required by law, and citizens did not hear about it until the transfer of ownership was reported in the *New York Times* some years later. Rappaport was granted a virtual monopoly on fuel-oil sales in the country, much as the Hadeeds control the supply of electricity. Rappaport also owns the Swiss American Bank in St. John's and has refinanced many of the government's loans.

Perhaps the most influential money man in the country since Lester became prime minister is Texas-born R. Allen Stanford. He is the chief of the

Houston-based Stanford Financial Group who in April 1999 was described by *Wall Street Journal* reporter Michael Allen as “a major contributor to the recent reelection campaign of Prime Minister Lester Bird and the biggest banker on the island.” The 49-year-old Stanford is chairman and owner of Stanford International Bank, Ltd., the largest of the 40 or so offshore banks that now operate in Antigua and Barbuda, and head of the domestic Bank of Antigua.

In 1998 Stanford was named by the government to the board that oversees the offshore financial sector, an evident conflict of interest. After the board overhauled the regulations governing offshore finance and tightened secrecy provisions, the U.S. Treasury Department issued an advisory to U.S. banks, only the second one in history specifically targeting a foreign country, to scrutinize all financial transactions routed into or out of Antigua and Barbuda for evidence of money laundering. The United Kingdom issued a similar advisory soon after. Lionel Hurst, Antigua’s ambassador to the United States, charged that Washington wanted to undermine the country’s attempt to diversify its tourism-dependent economy. Nonetheless, the Bird government subsequently replaced bankers with public officials on the offshore oversight board, and Lester has expressed hope that differences with the United States could be overcome.

Stanford also has become a major player in the local real estate market. Aside from involvement in residential housing, he is financing the construction of a new hospital and is developing Airport Village, an endeavor which will turn the area around V.C. Bird International Airport where both of his banks are located into a small city. The project, to include a four-star hotel, cricket stadium, Olympic-sized swimming pool, and a government information center, is tagged at around \$100 million. Following Hurricane Georges, Stanford granted the government a \$5 million interest-free loan to be used for reconstruction. The opposition charged that the government gave Stanford as collateral prime public lands with high potential for tourism development. The allegation was denied, but again, with government business dealings cloaked in secrecy, it remains difficult for citizens or analysts to determine the truth in such matters.

Stanford, Rappaport, and the Hadeeds are naturalized citizens of Antigua and Barbuda, which allows Lester to boast that only five percent of the land in the country is owned by foreigners. They, along with the relatively small number of other immigrant and local families who have amassed enormous wealth thanks to cozy relations with the Birds, sit atop what has become one of the most unequal societies in the English-speaking Caribbean. That helps explain why in the country with the second-highest per capita income level in CARICOM, one can find areas of entrenched poverty extending from rural areas to the slums of St. John’s.

There is also Dato Tan Kay Hock, a Malaysian tycoon granted approval by the government to develop Guiana Island, just off the mainland of Antigua, into

Asian Village, one of the biggest proposed tourism projects in the Caribbean. The government sold Tan the land for a mere \$5 million even as the ownership of the property remained in dispute. Tan has promised to put about \$600 million into the project, more than the country's gross national product. The UPP sued to block the sale of the land on the grounds it was not the government's to sell and that no environmental impact study had been conducted. The government prevailed in the courts, and Tan was thrilled when the ALP won the elections in 1999, writing to Lester from Malaysia, "We in Kuala Lumpur are over the moon. We will be having a celebration of our own in a short while to toast your success."

The perception of the opposition and many ordinary citizens is that the Bird government is so beholden and under the sway of the Hadeeds, Rappaport, Stanford, Dato Tan, et al., that they in effect now constitute a new plantocracy. Lester dismisses that assessment as "utter nonsense." He did, however, say to this writer, "I won't deny that Allen Stanford and others have some reasonable influence with the government, but it is predicated on the fact that they are investors." He said that thanks to the support of investors and local business the ALP was able to spend about \$2 million on its campaign. The opposition estimated that the ruling party spent that much alone on its elaborate, high-tech final rally, millions more on the mass distribution of imported hams, turkeys, and other giveaways, and as much as \$10 million overall. Even if one goes by Lester's \$2-million figure, it would mean that the ALP spent about \$30 per capita in its 1999 campaign. In the 1996 presidential election in the United States, each party spent about \$60 million, or a little more than \$4 per capita.

### ***Blurring the Line Between Party and State***

During the campaign it was not hard to find Antiguan who had witnessed work crews from the Antigua Public Utilities Authority (APUA) erecting ALP billboards, overhead banners, and lighted displays, particularly in St. John's Rural East where the prime minister's giant visage, adorned with the slogan, "There's None Better Than Lester," seemed ubiquitous. It was just one of the more blatant examples of how the ALP over the decades has blurred the line between the ruling party and the state.

Another was when the prime minister formed a national task force to distribute international relief following Hurricane Georges in fall 1998. It included no civic, church, or opposition representatives, and was made up entirely of ALP cabinet ministers who would soon be up for reelection. There is also the ALP's domination of the broadcast media, which is examined more closely below, and the public sector. In violation of the constitution, no proper or effective civil service appeals board has ever been created, which allows the ALP, through the threat of arbitrary firing, to exercise political control over civil

servants and other public employees. Overall, it is a scenario that recalls the “party paramountcy,” or state-party system, established in Guyana by Forbes Burnham, who ruled that country for two decades until his death in 1985.

In January 1999 Lester proclaimed, without parliamentary approval, that hundreds of acres of public lands would be distributed to nearly 2,500 “deserving young people” at the rock-bottom price of \$1.50 per square foot. A “one-stop-shop” system was set up which bypassed normal government procedures to directly and quickly target areas where the ALP sought political advantage, particularly in the prime minister’s own constituency. Moreover, the land was not sold on a first-come-first-serve basis, as buyers reportedly were vetted by ALP operatives. Civic leaders and the opposition criticized the “Land for Youth” program as discriminatory and an abuse of authority in the utilization of public lands. The ALP denied that it was politically motivated, even as it seemed to stem directly from the warning by Ronald Sanders that “youth are a dangerous group if they are left unattended...they will vote for change.”

At the outset of the campaign, the Bird government trumpeted that it was waiving duties on the import of motor vehicles. The Chamber of Commerce warned in a statement that the duty-free concessions were inflicting “a critical wound to our economy,” and already had drained the treasury of up to EC\$40 million. “It is no secret that the government has been unable to pay millions of dollars to various business houses, contractors, etc. for goods and services provided to the government...How can the government justify this waste of our already scarce financial resources?...Regardless of which party forms the next government, the nation will be poorer and the people may very well have to be called upon to replenish lost revenues.”

Lester said that the waivers were not linked to the campaign, that they were only “a trial run” to find out whether lowering the cost of vehicles would impact positively or negatively on the economy in light of the fact that “we have no national transportation system.” A few days before the elections he announced that the government had enough information to make a determination, and that the duty-free concessions had been discontinued. To date, citizens are still awaiting the government’s report on its experiment.

### ***The Media***

In 1994 Lester committed his government to privatizing state-run ABS Television & Radio. It never happened, and the ALP and the Bird family remain in control of all the country’s television, cable, and AM and FM radio outlets, the media which by far reach the most people in the country. As the self-appointed minister of information since 1994, Lester presides directly over ABS. How the ALP exploits this monopoly was concisely put by Ronald Sanders in his 1996 memo, in which he wrote that the “role of the mass media” is to “carry good,

positive news about the Government and find as much negative news as it can to peddle about the opposition.”

When there is nothing negative to report on the UPP, ABS news programs generally ignore the party’s press conferences, public meetings, and statements, or edit video footage and audio tapes in such a way as to make the party look bad. It’s the same approach the media aligned with the ruling party in Mexico used against the opposition there until the Mexican government began to govern in a less authoritarian manner.

In 1997 a High Court judge ruled that ABS refusals to allow Baldwin Spencer to respond to broadcast statements by the prime minister “contravened the Opposition Leader’s right of equality of treatment guaranteed him under the Constitution.” Since then, however, little has changed. Although Lester tells visiting journalists and observers that “Spencer has equal time every time I make a major broadcast,” Spencer has kept log of the numerous occasions that he has been denied by James “Tanny” Rose, ABS chief information officer and prominent ALP whip who, according to Spencer, has told the opposition leader, “You don’t have the right to respond to everything the PM says.”

Following the 1994 elections, Winston Derrick and Samuel Derrick, editor and publisher of the *Daily Observer*, applied for a license to operate a radio station. After more than two years they finally obtained a permit under the Business License Act. The day after their station went on the air, police raided the premises, seized equipment, and arrested the Derricks on a charge of operating a station without fulfilling all licensing requirements. The Derricks lost the initial round in the courts. Their appeal, originally scheduled for 1998, was postponed and, conveniently for the ALP, still had not been heard by the time of the vote in 1999.

The *Daily Observer* and *Outlet* therefore remained the sole media through which the opposition could regularly and freely make its case to the electorate. Still, as Sanders noted, the two newspapers had “succeeded in harassing the Government and creating an agenda to which the Government has been forced to react,” which was why he urged that “the Government invest in putting them out of business.” Tim Hector pointed to that line in the Sanders memo, as well as to Sanders’ recommendation to take a more “virulent” approach toward the opposition press, after a substantial portion of the *Outlet* printing plant was destroyed by arsonists on November 19, 1998. Days earlier, the paper had published an exposé on a large quantity of arms purchased and brought secretly into the country by the government. Lester pledged to seek the assistance of Scotland Yard to investigate the fire, but nothing ever came of it and, to date, the crime has not been investigated. *Outlet* eventually was resurrected, with the newspaper being printed overseas but published only once a week rather than twice.

One of Sanders’ proposals to undermine the opposition press was to create a new newspaper, edited and majority-owned by ALP supporters, but



without the involvement of politicians so that “it cannot be classified as a ‘Government newspaper’.” It appeared to be no coincidence when, in early 1997, Allen Stanford started up the *Antigua Sun*, first as a weekly and then, in November 1998, with the campaign beginning to heat up, as a daily. The *Sun* has some talented journalists on staff and at times has exhibited a degree of editorial independence, but few in the country see it as much more than Stanford’s vehicle for promoting the interests of the ALP and himself. That was confirmed two days before the elections when Stanford personally spiked a news story which put the ALP in a negative light. When news editor Louis Daniel and sub-editor Horace Helps staged a sick-out in protest, Stanford suspended them for two weeks, then summarily fired them. He told the rest of the staff that the millions of dollars he had invested in the paper gave him the right to decide what was printed and that anyone who didn’t like it should quit.

The ALP also relies on the two-year-old *Informer*, a full-color tabloid which acts as a weekly advertisement for the ruling party and platform for ALP officials to assail the opposition. Initially, the newspaper did not identify in its pages the principals involved as required by the Newspapers Registration Act, and when government vehicles were seen distributing it, people believed the ALP was using government funds to publish it. When the opposition press demanded that the *Informer* abide by the law, the paper eventually disclosed that it was printed by Allen Stanford’s Sun Printing. However, the identity of the publisher, whether the government, Stanford, or someone else, remained obscure.

In the 1994 campaign the ALP barred the UPP from purchasing time in the media by strictly enforcing the 1975 electoral law which prohibited broadcast of any item “for the purpose of promoting or procuring the election of any candidate or of any political party.” Meanwhile, the ruling party filled the airwaves with political advertising thinly disguised as news about the government.

On February 8, a month before the 1999 elections, the ALP abruptly amended the electoral law to allow for paid political ads in the broadcast media. Almost immediately, television and radio were awash with ALP propaganda, including a nightly half-hour program, “Big Story,” produced by a Trinidadian media consulting firm. The amendment, passed by the ALP majority in one day and with little parliamentary discussion, gave the ALP a decided edge. Not only had it prepared its media advertising well in advance, forcing the UPP to play catch-up, but the rule change opened a new arena for the ruling party to exploit its substantial funding advantage.

Moreover, while the UPP did have some resources with which to purchase broadcast time, a number of its ads did not appear in the prime-time slots which were paid for, while some of its more hard-hitting spots were spiked altogether by ABS without, according to UPP officials, advance notice or reimbursement. There was also the issue of whether the ALP actually paid ABS

for the broadcast time it used. Lester said that it did, and that “we gave our receipts to parliament.” Baldwin Spencer said that the prime minister only read from the receipts, but did not enter them into the parliamentary record so that they could be examined and payment confirmed.

The ALP made another last-minute amendment to the electoral law which worked to its advantage. For the first time, political parties would be able to pay canvassers rather than rely solely on volunteers. Not only did that allow the ALP to further exploit its funding advantage, it also provided cover for its traditional propensity to buy votes with cash. As detailed below in the section on “The Outcome,” the UPP filed petitions after the elections which called for the vote to be voided in a number of constituencies. In one constituency, the UPP claimed to have direct evidence that agents of the ALP candidate had bribed voters with envelopes containing money. If the case eventually comes to court, expect ALP lawyers to argue that the recipients of the money were simply paid canvassers.

## The Campaign

A series of ominous incidents raised the level of tension as the campaign got underway in late 1998. As noted earlier, the *Outlet* premises were torched in November following its report that the government had secretly imported an estimated half million dollars worth of grenades, launchers, pistols, ammunition, tear-gas guns, gas masks, and other riot equipment. A few days later a suspicious fire broke out at the ministry of finance. Around the same time, arsonists set fire to the stage erected by a UPP candidate to launch his campaign. In January, yet another fire destroyed the country’s only prison in St. John’s.

The UPP alleged that a desperate ALP was resorting to violence either to cow the electorate or to establish a pretext for nullifying the vote if it were to lose. The government initially denied that it was importing arms, but as new evidence surfaced Lester finally acknowledged the shipments but stated that they were only part of a normal upgrading of the police force. The ALP also denied it was behind the violence and suggested that the UPP was responsible for the finance ministry fire in retaliation for the *Outlet* blaze.

At the ALP convention in January, Lester touted his government’s economic policies and said that in the words of John F. Kennedy, “When it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change.” As pointed out by Mark Fineman of the *Los Angeles Times*, the quote actually originated with a 17<sup>th</sup> century British nobleman. Lester declared that the economy had grown by nearly five percent in 1998, a claim repeated in the ALP’s 50-page election manifesto entitled, “Empowering the People.” As it turned out, when Finance

Minister John St. Luce gave the annual budget presentation after the elections, the economy had grown only 2.8 percent in 1998. Lester also reminded that Antigua and Barbuda had the second-highest GDP among the members of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States and ranked 29<sup>th</sup> among 174 countries on the United Nations Human Development Index.

The ALP manifesto, not unlike others produced by incumbent parties in the region, spent page after page promising everything from land distribution, housing, business subsidies, higher government salaries, and scholarships, to increased spending on health, education, and infrastructure. It emphasized the ruling party's ability to attract foreign investment and stated, "The choice is further prosperity with the ALP or calamity with the UPP."

The ALP also recycled some of the numerous unfulfilled commitments from its 1994 manifesto, including reform of the electoral system, voter re-registration, privatization of the state-own media, anti-corruption legislation, environmental impact statements for development projects, and a complete public audit of government financial accounts. Regarding the last point, the manifesto stated, "The present Director of Audit and her team are working diligently to submit government-audited accounts to the Public Accounts Committee of the House of Representatives." The manifesto even provided a photograph of the Director of Audit, Ms. Arah Armstrong.

At the ALP convention Lester asserted that a UPP victory would bring economic collapse by scaring off foreign investors and tourists, a central ALP theme throughout the campaign. In its ads, which saturated the broadcast media, the party harped on the fact that the opposition had fought against the Asian Village project and warned that under a UPP government ongoing projects such as the new hospital and vendors mall would be terminated and unemployment, which the government pegged at about five percent in 1998, would soar. One television spot showed a dejected construction worker slumping to the ground, his hard hat tumbling from his head.

In the UPP's manifesto, which Lester called "a sinister document," Baldwin Spencer wrote, "The Lester Bird Administration has carried out the affairs of this nation as though it were a private concern. They have refused to account to the public and the Parliament for their actions and expenditures of public funds." He vowed that as prime minister he would institute a "policy of consulting with you the people of this nation on issues and programmes that affect you all...This will be your assurance that you can have development and prosperity without corruption, patronage and the attended loss of dignity."

Entitled "Leadership You Know You Can Trust," the UPP manifesto pledged transparent government and vowed to eliminate political victimization in the public sector. It also promised constitutional reform to strengthen the role of parliament and ensure "a multi-party approach to governance." One of its few detailed proposals involved decentralizing government through elected "community councils." The councils would have a say in local policy-making and

would, the UPP claimed, replace patronage and favoritism as a means to distribute government services. The manifesto laid out a code of conduct which included a vow that UPP cabinet ministers and members of parliament would be required annually to declare personal assets and income to ensure against conflicts of interest.

The UPP stated that it would “spare no effort in pursuing a rebalance of the ownership and control” of the economy. It said that it would continue the policy of welcoming foreign investment, but would aim for more joint-project relationships and the involvement of Antiguan businesses. To that end, it vowed to include the views of the local private sector and labor unions in national economic planning, but did not specify how that would be accomplished. Another commitment was to “discontinue the practice of importing workers at the expense of our local tradesmen.” The party also said that it would “diversify the tax structure and improve the tax administration.” The ALP jumped on that, saying it meant the UPP would impose a personal income tax.

The UPP also made a number of populist promises, including interest-free loans for government workers to purchase land and housing, national health and unemployment insurance plans, reduction in the cost of public utilities, and rental units for low-income people. When asked how a UPP government would pay for such programs, Baldwin Spencer said, “All we need to do is to plug the loopholes of corruption, stop the hemorrhage of the finances of this country, and channel resources where they are supposed to go.”

### ***On the Stump***

The campaign was fought fiercely by both sides, as public rallies often turned into mutually venomous exchanges and personal attacks. The Antigua and Barbuda Christian Council and the United Evangelical Association stepped into this highly polarized atmosphere and managed to broker a code of conduct which was signed by all parties and independent candidates. Although the church organizations had no formal mechanism to monitor adherence, and neither the ALP nor the UPP fully abided by the agreement to stick to the issues, the code did seem to have a restraining influence as the last six weeks of the campaign were mostly free of violence.

On the stump, the positions taken in the manifestos were distilled into pithy slogans and campaign songs. The ALP hammered home the theme, “We Deliver,” and promised to eradicate unemployment and increase wages. It accused *Outlet* and the *Daily Observer* of working to “destabilize the country,” and the UPP of planning to cancel every development project initiated by the government. One oft-repeated line was that “the ALP courts foreign investors, while the opposition takes them to court,” an allusion to the UPP’s failed attempt to stop the Asian Village with a lawsuit.

For their part, UPP candidates stressed the corruption issue, declaring “We Are Not For Sale,” and leading marches under banners to that effect. Speeches echoed UPP fliers which read, “Now they desperately need your vote. For Christmas they gave you free hams, turkeys & chickens. Now it is duty-free cars, land, stereos, stoves, refrigerators, microwaves, sneakers, cash and EMPTY PROMISES.” The UPP encouraged voters to accept the giveaways, then vote for clean, responsible government. The lyrics to one of its campaign songs went, “We are going to eat you out, drink you out, take all your freebies and then vote you out.”

### ***The Last Lap***

In the final weeks the UPP drew increasingly greater numbers of people to its public events and the buzz on the streets was that the elections could be close. A few of the foreign journalists covering the campaign thought that despite the deficient electoral system and uneven playing field the UPP might actually have a chance. Others disagreed, including Hayden Boyce of the Barbados *Nation*, who said, “It’s about money and control.”

There was also the question of the ALP-commissioned opinion poll. The poll was conducted in mid-February by Ronald Lester, head of Lester & Associates, a survey and market research group based in Washington, D.C., which has worked for Democrats in the U.S. Congress and conducted focus groups for the ruling People’s National Party in Jamaica. According to the firm’s telephone survey of 593 likely voters from all constituencies, the ALP would win 57.7 percent of the vote and the UPP 16.8 percent, with a margin of error of plus or minus four percent. Pollster Lester said in an interview before the vote that his data indicated that the ALP would win in a minimum of nine of the 17 constituencies. He added that a good number of undecideds might vote UPP, but, “We’re going to win big because the economy’s doing so well.”

The UPP and the opposition newspapers questioned the validity of the poll. One allegation was that Lester & Associates had been paid by the ALP to produce a poll which would show the ALP so far ahead that it would discourage UPP-leaning undecideds from voting. Indeed, the ALP immediately incorporated the survey into its campaign, with candidates and ABS news reports adopting a triumphalist tone. In an interview, Ronald Lester stood by the results of his poll, but would say only off the record how his polling staff identified themselves over the telephone. A number of opposition and civic figures said to this writer that if the Lester & Associates poll actually were an accurate survey of registered voters, it was further proof that the voter registry was heavily weighted with the names of ineligible immigrants beholden to the ALP.

A few weeks later the *Daily Observer* issued the results of its own poll conducted by the National Opinion Research Organization, a local outfit affiliated with the newspaper, in conjunction with an unnamed New York-based

firm. According to the survey of 790 likely voters, the UPP would win 55.2 percent of the vote and the ALP 41.1 percent, with a margin of error of plus or minus three percent. It predicted that the UPP would win in at least nine constituencies, the converse of the Lester & Associates projection.

Less than a week before the vote, the *Daily Observer* exposed what it said was a second confidential memo from Ronald Sanders to Prime Minister Bird. The memo, reproduced as an insert in the newspaper, was potentially very damaging to the ALP. Entitled "We Must Win At All Costs" and dated January 1, 1999, the memo called upon the ruling party to, among other things, influence voters through duty-free concessions, assistance with mortgage payments, and the paying of utility bills. To make up for lost revenues, the writer said that after the elections the government must cut costs by laying off a third of public sector workers and importing an additional 7,000 immigrant workers.

Lester and Sanders categorically denied that the memo was genuine. Lester called it a "total concoction" and said to this writer, "It came straight out of the *Daily Observer* stable. I think Selvyn Walter wrote it, or at least had a hand in it." Walter is the half brother of George Walter and a frequent *Daily Observer* contributor who was the UPP candidate running against Lester in St. John's Rural East. The *Daily Observer* insisted the document was genuine, that it had "been taken from the files of Prime Minister Bird by a patriotic citizen of Antigua & Barbuda and given to the *Daily Observer*."

That such a sensitive document might have been leaked to the opposition press was plausible because it had happened numerous times before. But an examination of this purported memo in comparison with the 1996 Sanders memo revealed numerous inconsistencies in style and tone. The 1996 memo was deliberative and closely reasoned, but the new document was almost scattershot in structure and frequently descended into cliché, hyperbole, and rhetorical excess. Moreover, although the author does not directly state that he is Sanders, he goes far out of the way to identify himself as the author of the 1996 memo, even spelling out the title of that document, hardly necessary since Lester would already have known who the writer was.

While citizens pondered the origin of the document and observers tried to divine what effect it might have on the vote, the political parties prepared for their final rallies in St. John's. The UPP held an impressive event featuring a number of live bands as well as speakers from the BPM, the UPP's ally on Barbuda. There were not enough blue-and-white pennants to go around and the party could not afford to provide food and drink, but local vendors made out very well.

The ALP, in turn, put on a high-tech extravaganza and giveaway gala unmatched by any campaign event held in the English-speaking Caribbean in recent years. The sound system could be heard for miles and 50-foot, brightly lit hot-air balloons ringed the site. There were 17 of the red-and-white balloons and each had the name of an ALP candidate and his personal slogan printed in

block letters on the side, for example, “There’s None Better Than Lester,” “Humphreys Does Best For All Saints West,” “You Win With Molwyn,” “Rely on Guy,” “Vote Vere, You Know He’s Sincere.”

### ***The Commonwealth Observer Group***

Since the early 1990s the UPP has been seeking international election monitoring. It stepped up its demands after the summer 1998 registration period, calling for the Carter Center, the OAS, or a combination of the two, to conduct a thorough review of the voter registry before monitoring the entire electoral process. The UPP argued that there was precedent for election monitoring in CARICOM, noting the substantial role the Carter Center had played in the 1997 Jamaica elections and the 1992 Guyana elections.

The Carter Center and the OAS, however, only observe elections when welcomed by all parties, and it was clear that Prime Minister Bird wanted neither organization involved. He said that such extensive monitoring would put an unacceptable drain on the country’s resources, a curious argument given that OAS and Carter Center missions always cover their own expenses to ensure their neutrality in the eyes of citizens.

In November 1998, evidently aware that questions about the electoral system were again being raised internationally, Lester took a different tack. He announced that the Commonwealth secretary-general, Chief Emeka Anyaoka, had responded positively to a formal request to send a delegation to monitor the elections. UPP leader Spencer expressed support for Commonwealth involvement, but reiterated his party’s demand that other international organizations participate as well, with a mandate to thoroughly inspect the voter registry.

The three-member Commonwealth Observer Group arrived in Antigua on March 5, four days ahead of the vote. It was led by Muhammad Habibur Rahman, former Chief Justice of Bangladesh, and included Nana Mnandi, a member of the national executive committee of the ruling African National Congress in South Africa, and Gary Ouellet, a Canadian electoral expert. The group was supported by a team of three Commonwealth Secretariat officers led by Stuart Mole, director of the Secretary-General’s office in London.

The opposition contended that the Commonwealth group would not have sufficient time to fully ascertain the electoral conditions and the complexities of the registration issue, and that the group was too small to adequately monitor the elections themselves. While such concerns may have had merit, it must be said that the Commonwealth group operated very efficiently, met with all of the key players in the elections, spoke often with ordinary citizens, and, as evidenced by the detailed report it subsequently produced, proved itself to be a quick study of the electoral system and the political landscape.

## The Vote

During the campaign the UPP reminded voters that their vote in these elections would be secret because registration numbers would no longer be written on the ballot counterfoil retained by electoral authorities. However, voters discovered on election day that another procedure remained in place which also would allow the government to know how someone voted: at the same time a voter was handed a consecutively numbered ballot, the poll clerk wrote the voter's name, address, and occupation in sequential order in a "poll book." Many voters readily understood that keying the poll books to the used ballots would reveal how people voted.

There is no provision for the keeping of a poll book under the section on "Voting Procedure" in Article 35 of the First Schedule of the electoral law. But the procedure *is* included in the guidelines for electoral officials which were issued by the Supervisor of Elections in 1993 and are still in use. Lester Bird may have been aware of that in 1998 when he readily conceded on the counterfoil issue, but the UPP apparently did not realize it until the day of the vote.

Having marked his or her ballot, the voter was then asked to dip his or her right index finger in ink far enough to cover the nail, to ensure against double-voting. However, there were numerous complaints that the ink was not indelible and could in fact be scrubbed off. The Commonwealth Observer Group, which divided into three teams in order to make at least one visit to each of the 143 polling stations, fielded many such complaints. In its final report, the group stated, "Our own tests suggested that the ink could be of variable quality and we observed that some voters were able to avoid immersing the finger in the ink to the first joint."

The three Commonwealth teams also observed that many voters were granted assistance by presiding officers in casting their vote. Under Article 44 of the First Schedule of the electoral law, presiding officers can grant assistance only when the voter is incapable of marking a ballot because of blindness, serious physical disability, or illiteracy. The Commonwealth observers noted that in many instances the reasons for requesting assistance were obvious, but that there were also numerous cases where able-bodied voters apparently in full command of their faculties requested help. Moreover, they found that in "some polling districts, the numbers granted such assistance was around 25 percent of those voting." At one of those polling stations, they were told that the reason most often given for needing assistance was "nervousness," which under the law is not sufficient grounds for providing it.

The Commonwealth group commented that the percentage of people requesting assistance was "an unusually high number." That would be true in



most countries, but not in Antigua and Barbuda. Going back to the early days of V.C. Bird, having a voter request assistance has been one of the means by which the ALP confirms that a voter to whom it has promised a bribe or otherwise tried to influence actually has voted for the party's candidate. For when the request is granted, the presiding officer by law must mark the ballot, at the voter's direction, in the presence of all political party agents at the polling station. The ALP agent therefore knows immediately whether the voter has fulfilled his or her end of the bargain. The scheme works best, of course, when the presiding officer is in on the game and, as noted earlier, the roster of presiding officers and polling clerks was rife with people connected to the ALP.

There were a number of allegations of people voting twice because they were registered in more than one constituency. For example, UPP polling agents charged that ALP supporter Cyril Josiah voted both in St. Philip South and St. John's Rural West. A check of the voter registry by this writer revealed that "Cyril Josiah, Carpenter," was indeed registered in both constituencies. UPP polling agents also alleged that one woman voted as "Velma Jeffers" in St. Philip South and as "Velma Lewis" in All Saints West. A check of the voter registry showed that those names were in fact on the lists in those two constituencies. Whether these forms of double-voting were widespread is difficult to determine, but even a handful of cases could have affected the outcome in St. Philip South where the UPP candidate ultimately lost by eight votes. As noted earlier, the Office of the Supervisor of Elections lacked the necessary software to weed out instances of double registration.

There were also reported cases of voter impersonation. A number of UPP supporters said that they arrived at their assigned polling stations to find that someone had already voted in their name. One woman found that persons also had voted in the names of her nephew and two daughters, all of whom were away at school in the United States at the time. UPP polling agents also reported cases, five alone in the constituency of St. John's City West, in which people with Spanish accents, when asked by presiding officers to state their names, read haltingly from pieces of paper or notes written on their hands.

Given such allegations of double-voting and impersonation, it is worth noting the insight provided by Ronald Lester when he explained during an interview why he was confident that his poll was accurate. "We went through every name on the registration list with our constituency people, so we know every vote," he said.

The UPP also reported that there were numerous registered voters who found that their names no longer appeared on the registration list. This writer was able to confirm some of those cases in St. John's Rural West and All Saints West. Even the Allen Stanford-owned *Antigua Sun* reported that there were apparently dozens of such instances in some constituencies. UPP candidate Bertrand Joseph, running against Molwyn Joseph in St. Mary's North, told this writer in mid-afternoon on election day that the names of five of his supporters

were missing and that at least four others had been turned away by ALP-linked presiding officers because their names were misspelled on the registration list. Supervisor of Elections Richard John confirmed to the *Sun* that there had been various complaints about people being unable to vote, but could not say how many voters were affected. An ALP spokesperson contacted by the *Sun* said that the ruling party had not received any similar complaints from its supporters.

The UPP alleged, as well, that there were cases in which ALP activists violated the electoral law by attempting to engage voters within 100 feet of polling stations, and one instance, in St. John's Rural North, where ALP activists violated the law by "treating" voters, i.e., trying to influence them by giving them food and drink. However, unlike in previous elections, there appeared to be few outward attempts to intimidate voters. The Commonwealth Observer Group stated in its report, "The presence of police personnel at polling stations was discreet and, despite fears to the contrary, no incidents of violence were observed or reported."

## The Outcome

There were no reported irregularities in the counting of the ballots which took place at centralized locations in each constituency. Results were transmitted to the Office of the Supervisor of Elections and then on to ABS television and radio which broadcast them live that night on television and radio.

According to the final results issued by the Supervisor of Elections, the ALP won 52.94 percent of the valid vote, down from 54.44 percent in 1994. The UPP took 44.46 percent, up from 43.70 percent in 1994, while the BPM, the UPP's ally on Barbuda, took 1.26 percent, giving the main opposition parties a combined 45.72 percent of the vote. Although the opposition narrowed the gap in terms of the popular vote, in the first-past-the-post system the ALP wound up with 12 seats, up from 11 in 1994. The UPP took four seats, down from five in 1994, while the BPM retained the Barbuda seat, giving the opposition a total of five seats, one less than in 1994.

Lester Bird retained his seat in St. John's Rural East by a substantial margin. Nine other ALP incumbents also were reelected, including ALP chairman Vere Bird, Jr., Molwyn Joseph, Hilroy Humphreys, and Robin Yearwood, another party heavyweight who often fills in as prime minister when Lester is abroad.

UPP leader Baldwin Spencer was reelected in the St. John's Rural West constituency. Two other UPP incumbents also retained their seats, Hilson Baptiste and Charlesworth Samuel. BPM leader Hilbourne Frank was reelected in the Barbuda constituency.

In 1994, the UPP won the St. John's City West seat with Donald Halstead. Halstead, however, was expelled from the UPP in 1997 after breaking party ranks to support the Asian Village tourism project. In 1999 Halstead ran for reelection as an independent against two newcomers, Colin Derrick of the UPP and the ALP's Gaston Browne. Halstead received only 161 votes, but in doing so appeared to undermine Derrick who lost to Browne by 139 votes.

The UPP lost to the ALP by relatively small margins in three other constituencies. In St. Mary's North the UPP's Bertrand Joseph lost to Molwyn Joseph by 104 votes. In All Saints West the UPP's Ralph Potter lost to Hilroy Humphreys by 131 votes. And in St. John's Rural North the UPP's John Maginley lost to Bernard Percival by 172 votes.

There were two very tight contests, with the UPP prevailing in one, the ALP in the other. In St. George, the UPP's Kenneth "Nat Moses" Francis, who had lost to the ALP in this constituency in 1994, defeated ALP newcomer Guy Yearwood by five votes. In St. Philip South, ALP newcomer Sherfield Bowen beat UPP incumbent Wilmoth Daniel by eight votes.

Voter turnout officially was 63.61 percent, up a notch from 62.32 percent in 1994. That might indicate that a substantial number of voters remained disaffected for one reason or another. But given the bloated, highly suspect condition of the voter registry, it hardly makes sense to speculate.

A few days after the election, Prime Minister Bird named his cabinet, retaining for himself the foreign affairs and defense portfolios. Newcomers included Ronald Sanders, who was named senior ambassador and foreign trade representative with ministerial rank, and Errol Cort, the lawyer who represents Allen Stanford's banking interests in Antigua, who was appointed attorney general and minister of justice. Cort replaced Radford Hill, a lawyer for the Hadeed Group. Among the holdovers were Molwyn Joseph, who was named minister of tourism; John St. Luce, reappointed as finance minister; Hilroy Humphreys, named minister of trade and industry; and Robin Yearwood, appointed minister of public utilities, transport, and housing. Vere Jr., whom British jurist Louis Blom-Cooper had recommended should never again hold ministerial office, was appointed minister of agriculture and lands.

### ***Opposition Challenges Validity of the Elections***

A week after the vote the UPP filed petitions which challenged the validity of the vote in six constituencies: St. John's Rural East, St. John's Rural North, St. John's City West, St. Philip South, St. Mary's North, and All Saints West. All six petitions argued that the elections should be annulled because the use of the poll book to record in sequential order the particulars of each voter undermined the secrecy of the ballot and was "unauthorized by law." As noted earlier, there is in fact no provision in the electoral law for poll books or the use to which they were put.

Further arguments were made specific to one or more of the six constituencies. For example, the petition for St. John's Rural East, the prime minister's constituency, included assertions that duty-free concessions and the "Land for Youth" program were used to sway voters and were illegal under the section on "Bribery, Treating and Undue Influence," in Articles 40 through 42 of the electoral law. A number of the petitions included arguments for annulment based on evidence of double-voting and voter impersonation. The petition for St. Philip South referred to what it said was direct evidence that the ALP candidate and his agents had attempted to induce voters with cash bribes.

As of the end of May the petitions for St. John's Rural East and St. Philip South were tentatively scheduled to be tried in High Court around mid-summer, with the other four petitions to be scheduled for trial sometime later. The UPP hoped that the petitions would actually be judged on the merits, but feared that what Ronald Sanders referred to in his 1996 memo as the ALP government's "influence with the Courts" would prove to be the determining factor.

Meanwhile, the ALP filed a petition to overturn the results in St. George, where ALP candidate Guy Yearwood had lost by five votes. The petition argued that the election in St. George was invalid because one polling clerk had used 20 blue ballots, which are to be used only for tendered or contested ballots, instead of the standard white ballots during the course of the vote. The petition was filed two weeks after the elections, in evident contravention of the electoral law which, under Article 45, states that petitions must be presented within seven days of the issuing of official returns. That put in question whether it would ever come to trial.

## **Concluding Assessments**

The 1999 elections were neither fair nor completely free. As in 1994, the ruling party dominated the public and private broadcast media to the virtual exclusion of the opposition and in defiance of a 1997 High Court ruling that the government had "contravened the Opposition Leader's right of equality of treatment guaranteed him under the Constitution." That, coupled with the ALP's concerted use of public resources to influence voters and its vast, unaccountable spending, made for a highly uneven playing field and confirmed that the nation remained under the rule of state-party operating with impunity within a parliamentary framework.

As in previous elections, the reach of the ALP extended deep into the electoral system, compromising both the process of voter registration and the conduct of the actual vote. The voter registry has not been purged of dead and migrated voters since 1975. It can easily be manipulated for purposes of double-

voting and impersonation and, in 1999, may have included substantial numbers of people who were either illegally registered or otherwise ineligible to vote.

The integrity of the secret ballot was undermined in previous elections because voter registration numbers were written on the ballot counterfoil retained by electoral authorities. It was subverted in 1999 by the use of a poll book in which polling station officials recorded in sequential order the names and particulars of each voter at the same time they were being handed numbered ballots. Many voters readily understood that keying the poll books to the used ballots would reveal how people voted.

Despite the absence of a clean electoral system and a level playing field, the opposition narrowed the gap in terms of the popular vote compared with 1994 and, in the first-past-the-post system, lost in five constituencies by a combined total of only 554 votes. If the elections had been free and fair, the UPP conceivably could have won a majority of seats in parliament.

The Commonwealth Observer Group apparently came to similar conclusions regarding the electoral process. But as the Commonwealth is an organization of states of which Antigua and Barbuda is a member, the group diplomatically related them in its report in the form of recommendations. The group introduced its recommendations by noting that many “are in line with those contained in the Supervisor of Elections’ Report on the 1994 General Elections,” a nice way of reminding that the ALP had done nothing to implement them since the last elections five years ago. Because the Commonwealth recommendations get to the core of what needs to be changed if Antiguan and Barbudans are ever to enjoy free and fair elections, it is worth quoting from them at length:

- “the establishment of an Independent Electoral Commission in Antigua and Barbuda with, among other powers, the mandate to create a completely new register, introduce a system of voter identification cards, and arrange the re-drawing of constituency boundaries, and, as necessary, review electoral law.”
- “that such a body should have responsibilities in the area of the selection and training of electoral officials, who should reflect the independence and impartiality of the electoral commission.”
- “the establishment within the electoral commission of a Media Commission to draw up—in consultation with both the publicly- and privately-owned media houses in the country—guidelines on fair access to the electronic and print media for all political parties in Antigua and Barbuda, particularly during campaign periods. At the same time, the Media Commission would also have the remit to monitor public service and paid political broadcasts.”

- “the development of regulations on the amounts spent on campaigning at constituency and national levels, and a mechanism by which the transparency and probity of political donations could be measured.”
- “the discontinuation of the practice of entering voters’ details into a ‘poll book’ at the polling station and, if necessary, the introduction of other safeguards which would reinforce the integrity of the secrecy of the ballot, such as a re-design of the voting paper.”
- “that all efforts be made by all political parties to preserve as sacrosanct the neutrality of senior civil servants.”

The Commonwealth group also recommended a program which would “ensure that voters received non-partisan education and advice and, we believe, might have significantly reduced the incidence of ‘assisted voting’ we observed in a number of polling stations.” Such a program would no doubt be positive, but would not necessarily curb the ALP’s exploitation and evidently illegal use of assisted voting for its own political ends, as described earlier in the section on “The Vote.” To bring that to a halt would require independent and impartial electoral officials, already recommended by the Commonwealth group, and strict enforcement of the electoral law provisions on assisted voting.

The ALP government promised to consider the group’s recommendations, just as it committed itself to implementing those of the Supervisor of Elections five years ago. Antiguan and Barbudans can be forgiven if they remain skeptical, particularly as the ALP and its media arms selectively pulled out of context one particular passage in the Commonwealth report to spin the idea that the elections were free and fair. The report stated that “the electoral process we observed *on polling day* allowed the people of Antigua to freely express their political will at the polls [emphasis added].” ALP propagandists disregard that this passage is referring specifically to the events of election day, namely, that the vote was for the most part orderly and took place in an atmosphere free of violence and overt intimidation.

Some in the ALP remarked that the elections were valid because the results conformed to the Lester & Associates poll. However, while that survey did project the winner, the actual vote tallies were not within the poll’s four-percent margin of error, and not even close with regard to the opposition vote. Moreover, to the degree that the Lester poll was accurate, it confirmed that during the campaign the ALP effectively wielded the inordinate, across-the-board advantages it maintain as a virtual state-party.

After the vote Lester Bird appealed for national unity, stating, “Our hearts must not be hardened, our hearts must be gladdened.” The reality is that the elections left the country more polarized and opposition supporters more embittered than ever. Tensions may escalate if the High Court rules against the UPP election petitions, which for many citizens would only re-confirm that rule in Antigua and Barbuda is still based more on power and the

abuse of authority than on law. If the court does rule in favor of one or more of the petitions, the question is whether the ALP would implement the Commonwealth recommendations prior to holding by-elections or an entire new national vote.

Lester also will have to contend with potential disruptions inside the ALP. As Ronald Sanders pointed out in his 1996 memo to the prime minister, the ruling party is prone to internal turf battles and back-biting, with ministers providing information and documents to the opposition press to gain advantage and ensure their own personal stake. The ALP puts up a united front at election time, driven no doubt by an intense fear of losing power and the specter of official inquiries into its behavior while in government. The document purported by the opposition to have been a second memo from Sanders may not have been authentic, but its title, "We Must Win At All Costs," is an accurate characterization of the ALP mindset at election time.

After the elections, however, Lester faced the task of satisfying all of the ALP family. He appointed a bloated, 17-member cabinet which included most of the ALP's candidates. In trying to please everyone, he appointed all 12 ALP members of parliament to ministries, which meant that no one of them could occupy the position of deputy speaker who, according to the constitution, must be a backbencher. Lester tried to get BPM leader Hilbourne Frank to take the job but he declined. Lester finally demoted Sherfield Bowen from the cabinet so that he would qualify.

Finally, there is the question of the nation's economic health. The first Lester Bird government did create jobs, but it continued to borrow heavily in commercial markets and the foreign debt may now be greater than \$500 million. Meanwhile, as economic growth fell to 2.8 percent in 1998, the government was running a current-account deficit of nearly 15 percent, with about three-quarters of all expenditures earmarked for servicing the debt and paying public sector salaries and benefits. The gap has almost certainly widened given the heavy public spending, subsidies, and duty-free concessions the ALP used in the run-up to the elections. All of which means that the government will be ever more reliant on Allen Stanford, Dato Tan, the Hadeeds, Bruce Rappaport, and whomever else Lester can entice to partake in the spoils of the ongoing dynasty.

## About the Author

Douglas W. Payne is a senior associate with the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C. He has covered Latin America and the Caribbean since the early 1980s and has reported on elections, political transitions, and human rights conditions throughout the region. He is the author of the CSIS Western Hemisphere Election Study Series reports on the 1999 Grenada elections; the 1998 St. Vincent and the Grenadines elections; the 1997 Jamaica, Guyana and St. Lucia elections; the 1996 Suriname and Nicaragua elections; the 1995 Trinidad and Tobago elections; and the 1994 Antigua and Barbuda and St. Vincent and the Grenadines elections. He is also the author of *Emerging Voices: The West Indian, Dominican, and Haitian Diasporas in the United States* (CSIS 1998); *Storm Watch: Democracy in the Western Hemisphere into the Next Century* (CSIS 1998); and *Democracy in the Caribbean: A Cause for Concern* (CSIS 1995). He has written for *Harper's* magazine, the *New York Times Magazine*, *Dissent* magazine, the *New Republic*, the *Washington Post*, the *Jamaica Gleaner*, *Carib News*, the *Journal of Commerce*, the *Miami Herald*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *International Herald Tribune*.



## Appendix: Results by Constituency

(\*incumbent)

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### St. John's City West

ALP: Gaston Browne	1,069
UPP: Colin Derrick	930
Independent: Donald Halstead*	161
Independent: Romaneta Francis	38

(\*Halstead won the seat as a UPP candidate in 1994)

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### St. John's City East

ALP: John St. Luce*	980
UPP: Harold Lovell	660

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### St. John's City South

ALP: Steadroy "Cutie" Benjamin*	845
UPP: Vaughn Walter	448

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### St. John's Rural West

UPP: Baldwin Spencer*	1,788
ALP: Bernard Walker	1,068

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### St. John's Rural South

ALP: Vere Bird, Jr.*	1,253
UPP: Leonard "Tim" Hector	802
Independent: Egbert Joseph	59

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### St. John's Rural East

ALP: Lester Bird*	1,704
UPP: Selvyn Walter	919
AFP: George "Rick" James	57

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### St. John's Rural North

ALP: Bernard Percival*	1,132
UPP: John Maginley	960

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**St. Mary's North**

ALP: Molwyn Joseph*	1,493
UPP: Bertrand Joseph	1,389
Independent: Reginald Pelle	14

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**St. Mary's South**

UPP: Hilson Baptiste*	834
ALP: Laurent John	669
Independent: Hugh Marshall	64

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**All Saints East & St. Luke**

UPP: Charlesworth Samuel*	1,461
ALP: Rupert Sterling	974

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**All Saints West**

ALP: Hilroy Humphreys*	1,155
UPP: Ralph Potter	1,024

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**St. George**

UPP: Kenneth "Nat Moses" Francis	1,330
ALP: Guy Yearwood	1,325
Independent: James Ramsey	19

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**St. Peter**

ALP: Longford Jeremy*	711
UPP: Everette Weaver	389
NRM: Knolly Hill	33

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**St. Philip North**

ALP: Robin Yearwood*	1,017
UPP: Francis Nunes, Jr.	361

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**St. Philip South**

ALP: Sherfield Bowen	596
UPP: Wilmoth Daniel*	588

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**St. Paul**

ALP: Rodney Williams*	1,201
UPP: Eleston Adams	830

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**Barbuda**

BPM: Hilbourne Frank*	418
ALP: Reuben James	329

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