

# Will the Real Revolutionaries Please Stand Up?

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If there had been a CNN, a Fox News or a BBC three hundred and fifty years ago - in 1652 - Barbados would have been the leading international news story of the day! All over the world, people would have been talking about the remarkable news of the signing of the **Charter of Barbados** at Oistins Town by representatives of the Commonwealth or Republic of Great Britain and representatives of the citizens of a self-declared independent Barbados.

Journalists in all of the great centres of civilization in Africa, Europe and Asia would have been marvelling at the fact that a number of the inhabitants of the small British colony of Barbados had exhibited the audacity to unilaterally declare their independence from Great Britain on 18<sup>th</sup> February 1651; had gone on to fight a war of independence against Britain; and had finally been forced to capitulate to the much greater military might of Great Britain in January 1652, but on terms that did much honour to Barbados.

Freedom loving people all over the world would have been thrilled to read the text of Barbados' declaration of Independence:-

"Shall we be bound to the Government and Lordship of a Parliament in which we have no Representatives or persons chosen by us for there to propound and consent to what might be needful to us, as also to oppose and dispute all what should tend to our disadvantage and harm? In truth, this would be a slavery far exceeding all that the English nation hath yet suffered..... So we will not alienate ourselves from those old heroic virtues of true English men, to prostitute our freedom and privileges to which we are born, to the will and opinion of any one; neither do we think our number so contemptible, nor our resolution so weak, to be forced or persuaded to so ignoble a submission, and we cannot think, that there are any amongst us who are so simple, and so unworthily minded, that they would not rather choose a noble death than forsake their old liberties and privileges".

Furthermore, all the political pundits of the day would have noted that the **Charter of Barbados** had established the fundamental political and economic principle of "**no taxation without representation**" when it stated - "No taxes, customs, imports, loans or excise shall be laid, nor levy made on any of the inhabitants of this island without their consent in a General Assembly". (Thus, Barbados had dealt with and resolved the fundamental issue around which the **American Revolution** was fought and won, a full 124 years before George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton and the other American revolutionaries took up arms against Great Britain!)

And so, little Barbados would have been the talk of the day, with oppressed people all over the world marvelling at the thrilling words and sentiments of freedom emanating from the bold Barbadians!

But in the midst of all this excitement, the more thoughtful and sober analysts would have noted that underlying the seemingly stirring Barbados story lay some very harsh, dark and ignoble contradictions and realities!

Firstly, they would have been forced to recognise that the Barbadians who spoke and wrote so magnificently about "freedom" were all white men who had reduced tens of thousands African men and women to slavery in Barbados, and a similar number of poor Europeans to indentured servitude!

Secondly, it would not have escaped them that the Barbadians were declaring Independence not so much of Britain, but of "Republican Britain"! You see, the Barbadians had declared Independence in the midst of the English Civil War, and at a time when the anti-Monarchy forces under Oliver Cromwell had defeated and executed the British King, and had declared Britain to be a Republic. The Barbadians were therefore repudiating the progressive political ideal of republicanism, and were wedding themselves to the backward and obsolete institution of the British monarchy.

Unfortunately therefore, these harsh contradictions and realities take much of the gloss off an episode in our Barbadian history that we would otherwise wish to celebrate! But if we are looking for a true and thrilling story of mid 17<sup>th</sup> century Barbadian revolutionism to celebrate, we don't have to look any further than the year 1649 - arguably the most revolutionary year in the history of Barbados.

The year 1649 was the year in which both segments of the oppressed Barbadian working-class - the white indentured servants and the enslaved black Africans - erupted in separate gestures of revolt against the repressive white slave master class - the class of men who, one year later, would go on issue the famous

Barbadian version of a declaration of independence.

Several historians of 17<sup>th</sup> century Barbados record the plotting of a major insurrection by the white indentured servants of Barbados in 1649. Unfortunately the conspiracy was discovered and 18 of the principal poor white revolutionaries were executed. But such horrific 'exemplary punishment' did not deter a number of enslaved Africans from also plotting ,in the said year of 1649, to revolt by setting fire to the plantation on which they were incarcerated. Sadly, this plot too was sold out, and the conspirators received what the historian, Richard Ligon, described as "condign punishment".

The fundamental point to be made therefore is that while the revolutionary activism of the wealthy white slave-owning Barbadians of 1652 is of great historical importance, yet it pales in comparison to the thoroughgoing, un-compromised revolutionism of the white indentured servants and enslaved Africans of Barbados who set out to overthrow an evil system of human oppression!

Barbadians need to spend much more time investigating and getting to know their own history - all of it - the good, the bad, the indifferent, the inspiring. For it is only by knowing our history and realistically accepting it for what it is, that we will develop a collective firmly rooted sense of Barbadian identity, and arrive at a place of greater racial understanding and acceptance of each other as fellow Barbadians.

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January 21, 2012