

ST HELENA: AN ISLAND OF SHOPKEEPERS?

by Trevor W. Hearl

No-one would claim that *The St Helena Government Gazette* offers riveting reading, yet it can give St Helena-watchers fresh insights into the Island community and its administration. It is also value for money - £12.50 (post free) for 64 issues last year (1993) - and a gem of typography. "None of the cyclostyled stuff you get elsewhere", Governor Alan Hoole proudly told Kenneth Bain in *St Helena, The Island, Her People and Their Ship* (page 51). "*The Gazette* is a model of printing style and layout, just right for St Helena".

It might be thought that governing a village-style population of about 6,000 would not call for such a formal publication, but even tiny colonies carry the legal and administrative responsibilities of national governments. For example, as 1993 was General Election year, several issues were devoted to polling, candidates, results, Legislative Council Committees - Agriculture, Education, Health, Public Works and Social Services - and the new Executive Council. This was also reported in *The St Helena News*, but most *Gazette* items are "exclusive".

A major feature is the appointment of officials, lists of recruits, promotions, postings, resignations and dismissals - over 170 changes among salaried staff in 1993, enough for cynics to claim that 'government' is St Helena's main industry. It certainly suggests a level of instability, inexperience and high training costs which must trouble senior executives. Whether the high proportion of professional women - almost twice that of men - is significant, only detailed research could reveal. Another feature gives notice of new Ordinances (30 last year including Ascension Island and Tristan da Cunha), and those "non-disallowed" - having passed the scrutiny of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office "Her Majesty the Queen will not exercise her powers of disallowance". Proclamations ordaining public holidays cried "God Save the Queen!" While other Public Announcements recorded the creation of more 'Authorities' (fisheries, water, finance and highways), and charges for Government services, ranging from 9p. for eggs "small and cracked", to £95 a day for hiring a bulldozer "with operator". Philatelists would learn of new stamp issues (four in 1993), and conservationists discover that 6,400 acres of National, and 60 acres of Dedicated, Forest had been designated. The year's building activity is shown by applications for some 70 licences, including those for a church in Rupperts Valley and a Rectory in Half Tree Hollow.

Two other categories seem to call for special mention. One records changes of name - only surnames usually - of which there were an average 20 cases in 1993, 14 on behalf of children. The past six years have seen over 120 name changes, 90 of children, usually requested by mothers. Nine men also changed their name - Nigel Henry to Nigel Lamborghini being one to puzzle future generations. The scale of changes must be seen against an annual birth-rate of about 70.

The other category is that of "Trade Licences". These control entry into eight types of business - shopkeeper, equipment hirer, itinerant trader, mercantile agent, auctioneer, butcher and refreshment-room or hotel keeper. Licences (£10 p.a.) are issued by the Financial Secretary who, allowing for objections and appeals, has absolute discretion backed by penalties of up to a fine of £100 and 6-months' imprisonment. Unfortunately the Gazette does not publish the licences granted, but if all last year's applicants were successful the Island would have gained 54 new businesses, including 8 wholesalers and 29 retailers! Most were to open near competitors, over half in Jamestown, and only a few in the country, three at Sandy Bay and one at Horse Pasture. A glance at the operation of the Trade (Licensing) Ordinance 1987, since it replaced the 1970 licensing legislation on 5th April 1987, produced even more surprising statistics.

The first applicant on 30th June 1987, seeking to open yet another shop in Barrack Square, Jamestown, has been followed in 6½ years by 200 others, two-thirds of them women. Their applications allowed for 98 shops, 22 wholesalers, 43 hirers of equipment, 16 itinerant traders, 11 refreshment rooms and an auctioneer - the Nursing Officer raising funds for the Handicapped Persons Day Centre! These would not, in fact, have created 200 new businesses, as not all were granted - seven applied for a hotelkeeper's licence at Oaklands - and some needed more than one licence. But to these must be added hundreds of existing traders - all serving an adult population of under 4,000 souls!

Perhaps economists can explain how St Helena generates such commercial vitality while its economy remains so unproductive. Trading in local products is exempt from licence, so it is no mere formalisation of tradition by which Islanders sold to friends rather than a central market. Nor is it inward investment, deterred by Immigrants Employment (Control), Landholding (Restriction) and Work Permit Ordinances. It is a form of mini-market economy which pre-supposes no lack of either capital, to hold stock and manage property, or of cash customers, to make it worthwhile. That Napoleon's Nation of Shopkeepers should meet its match here must be worthy of an entry in the Guinness Book of Records!

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