

A BAHAMIAN VICTORY

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Willingly we traveled to Nassau for the three day run up to the vote in the 2002 referendum in order to observe and comment upon the pending constitutional issues and processes. Our schedule demanded that we fly back before the polling booths had closed that Wednesday, but we saw enough to establish our conviction that Bahamians could handle deciding their own fate. Though given little time, they were indeed deliberating! That central aspect of constitutional decision making became clear in conversations with drivers, shop keepers, museum docents, and countless others. Still, without opinion surveys we were in no position to foretell the outcome of the vote. There always existed the possibility that the voters would be prevailed upon, not by their own understanding of constitutional imperatives but, by deference to plainly stated political imperatives.

What a stunning surprise, then, to read via the world wide web the headline that declared all five measures overwhelmingly rejected! While we immediately attributed the results to superior organization and communication on the part of the principals urging a “no” vote, we ultimately had to reflect on what this experience said even more clearly, not about the politicians, but about the citizens of The Bahamas. Reflecting upon matters in that light, we come away with great pride in the accomplishments of Bahamian citizens.

One might rightly ask, “What’s pride got to do with it?” Why would academics from the United States, with none more than a scholarly interest, care one way or the other how the Bahamians reacted to the issues they deliberated? The best way to explain that is to expand upon the reply we gave to the ZNS reporter, who asked in an interview whether we could suggest something that Bahamians might learn from the experience of the United States as they pondered their vote.

Although we said then, and would repeat now, that this was a decision for Bahamians that could not be influenced by any notions of how Americans might do things, there is an aspect of U.S. experience that is directly pertinent. It is not, however, the U.S. of the 21st century, the global super power, that is instructive, so much as it is the newly independent, de-colonized United States of the late 18th and early 19th century. For the United States began its independent political life by declaring, in the Declaration of Independence, that it submitted its appeal to a “candid world.”

In this move the young nation held that it was willing to be judged by principles it expected reasonable people everywhere to acknowledge, and the most important of these principles was the confidence that ordinary citizens could make these most important judgments. Self-government was not a slogan but rather a central motif of United States experience. To that extent, each time the principle of self-government is vindicated anywhere else in the world it redounds to ratify the original American decision. When that occurs near to U. S. borders, it takes on special value. We were proud that Bahamians showed the strength of judgment and courage to say to the world, we are in charge here, and we invite you to pay attention to what we’re doing! That contributed much to the understanding of our students, in our current class, “Politics, Culture, and Post-Colonialism,” as we shared with them this heartening experience.

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