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The Politics of Antigua and Barbuda

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Introduction

Antigua and Barbuda, a twin-island nation nestled in the Eastern Caribbean, occupies a unique position in the landscape of Caribbean politics. As a former British colony that achieved independence in 1981, the country's political system retains the deep imprint of the Westminster parliamentary model, blended with adaptations that reflect its history, social fabric, and evolving national identity. This book, 'The Politics of Antigua and Barbuda: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Antigua and Barbuda,' aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the country's political architecture, its historical roots, ongoing challenges, and contemporary dynamics.

At the heart of Antigua and Barbuda's political system lies its constitutional framework—a document born at independence that sets out the country's structures of government, the separation of powers, and the fundamental rights of its citizens. The structure remains a constitutional monarchy, with the British monarch as head of state represented by a Governor-General. Meanwhile, power and governance are wielded primarily by locally elected and appointed officials, reflecting both traditional and modern avenues for political leadership. This arrangement has fostered political stability, yet also provoked ongoing debates about national identity, governance, and the prospect of republicanism.

The political landscape in Antigua and Barbuda has been dominated by a small number of political parties, with the Antigua and Barbuda Labour Party (ABLP) playing a particularly prominent and enduring role. This dominance, alongside the coming and going of opposition parties such as the United Progressive Party (UPP), has shaped the nature of political competition, government formation, and public debate. Moreover, the relationship between Antigua and Barbuda—the two islands forming a single nation—has remained a persistent source of both unity and tension, especially concerning local governance and land ownership issues on Barbuda.

This book explores not only the formal institutions of state—such as the Parliament, executive, and judiciary—but also the informal and societal factors that influence politics in the country. It addresses the complexities of local government in Barbuda, the practice of communal land ownership, the role of the media, and the influence of civil society. Special attention is given to the continuing struggles over corruption, the transparency of the electoral process, and the level of representation for women and minority groups in politics.

Additionally, we consider Antigua and Barbuda's engagement with the wider world. As a member of the Commonwealth, CARICOM, and regional legal bodies, the nation's foreign relations and economic strategies—including its controversial citizenship by

investment program—intersect with domestic politics and policy-making. The effects of international pressures and global change are never far removed from the local political arena.

‘The Politics of Antigua and Barbuda’ is intended as a foundational resource for students, researchers, citizens, and anyone interested in understanding the workings of this small but significant Caribbean democracy. Through careful examination of its history, institutions, and current challenges, the following chapters aim to shed light on both the resilience and the vulnerabilities of the nation’s political system—preparing readers to engage knowledgeably with the issues that will shape Antigua and Barbuda’s political future.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Historical Foundations of Antigua and Barbuda's Political System

The political system of Antigua and Barbuda did not spring forth fully formed upon the declaration of independence in 1981. Its roots run deep into the islands' past, a history shaped by colonization, the brutal economics of the sugar plantation, the transatlantic slave trade, and the eventual struggle for self-determination. Understanding this historical trajectory is essential to grasping the unique characteristics of the nation's governance today. The story begins long before European arrival, with the islands inhabited by the Siboney, followed by the Arawak and Carib peoples. These early inhabitants left their mark, but the arrival of Europeans would fundamentally alter the islands' destiny.

Christopher Columbus is credited with sighting Antigua in 1493, naming it after a church in Seville. However, initial attempts at colonization by the Spanish were unsuccessful. The English eventually made a successful claim in 1632, with settlers arriving from St. Kitts. This marked the beginning of a long period of British control that would shape the islands' political and social structures. Antigua was briefly under French control in 1666, but was returned to the English the following year through the Treaty of Breda. From 1667 until independence in 1981, Antigua remained a British possession.

The establishment of sugar plantations became the driving force behind the islands' economy and, consequently, their political development. Sir Christopher Codrington was a pivotal figure in this era, establishing the first large sugar estate in Antigua in 1674. He also leased Barbuda from the Crown in 1685, intending it as a provision and, somewhat chillingly, a slave-breeding colony, though the latter never fully materialized in the way perhaps envisioned, with enslaved people on Barbuda developing a more self-reliant community. The profitability of sugar led to a rapid expansion of plantations, transforming the landscape and economy.

This economic system was built on the horrific foundation of enslaved African labor. The transatlantic slave trade brought a large enslaved population to the islands, who vastly outnumbered the European settlers and endured unimaginable hardships. The brutalities of this period left an indelible mark on the islands' history and contributed to a deep-seated yearning for freedom that would fuel future independence movements. The system of slavery also created a rigid social hierarchy based on race and color, which persisted even after emancipation.

The abolition of slavery in 1834 was a significant turning point. However, it did not

immediately translate to full freedom and economic independence for the formerly enslaved population. Many remained economically dependent on the plantation owners due to limited access to land and credit. This period saw continued conflict between the former enslaved people and the planters, with the struggle for land becoming a key issue. The government did make some land available, which allowed some to move away from the plantations and establish villages, but economic opportunities remained limited.

Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, Antigua and Barbuda remained under British colonial rule, experiencing various economic fluctuations and political reforms. Antigua was administered as part of the British Leeward Islands colony for much of this time, though Barbuda had a somewhat distinct administrative history, at one point being essentially treated as private property by the Codrington family before reverting to the Crown and becoming more closely linked with Antigua.

A crucial development in the movement towards self-governance was the rise of trade unionism in the mid-20th century. Poor labor conditions spurred the formation of the Antigua Trades and Labour Union (AT&LU) in 1939. This union became a powerful force for change, recognizing that political power was necessary to effectively advocate for workers' rights. The AT&LU's activism was instrumental in mobilizing the population and pushing for greater autonomy.

From the AT&LU emerged a political arm, the Antigua Labour Party (ALP), formed in 1946. This party, closely linked to the union, quickly became a dominant force in Antiguan politics. Vere Cornwall Bird, a prominent figure in the trade union movement, became president of the AT&LU in 1943 and a key leader of the ALP. He would go on to play a central role in the country's political development for decades.

The political landscape began to shift more significantly in the mid-20th century with gradual constitutional changes. Antigua and Barbuda were part of the short-lived West Indies Federation from 1958 to 1962. Following the dissolution of the federation, Antigua pursued discussions for alternative forms of self-governance. This culminated in achieving associated statehood with the United Kingdom on February 27, 1967.

Associated statehood granted Antigua and Barbuda full internal self-governance, while Britain retained responsibility for external affairs and defense. Vere Bird became the first Premier under this new arrangement. This period saw significant political activity, including the emergence of a second labor union and its affiliated political party, the Progressive Labour Movement (PLM), and growing calls for independence. The PLM even unseated the ALP in the 1971 general election, with George Walter becoming Premier, though the ALP, led by Bird, returned to power in 1976.

The move towards full independence gained momentum in the 1970s. Despite some initial hesitation from Vere Bird regarding the islands' readiness, independence

became a central campaign issue in the 1980 election, which the ALP won. A constitutional conference was held, and although the issue of Barbuda's desire for secession presented an obstacle, a compromise was reached that granted Barbuda a degree of internal autonomy.

Finally, on November 1, 1981, Antigua and Barbuda achieved full independence, marking the birth of a new sovereign nation. Vere Bird became the first Prime Minister of the independent state. The lowering of the Union Jack and the raising of the new national flag symbolized the culmination of a long journey from colonial rule to self-determination. This historical journey, marked by the legacies of slavery, the plantation economy, the rise of labor movements, and the steps towards self-governance, laid the groundwork for the political system that exists in Antigua and Barbuda today.

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