

ALBERTINE'S GIRL

It was a tumultuous opening of the new parliamentary year 1986. A fragmented and weakened Netherlands Antilles was being launched on January 1st.

Aruba after years of bickering and non-cooperation with Curacao had just achieved its own separate status conditioned with independence after ten years. Mayotte and Aruba are the only two places I am aware of which gave up independence, later on, to climb back up into the lap of a perceived European mother.

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On the night of November 25th, 1985 I went to the radio station to thank the people of Saba for having given me a personal vote of 57% of the votes cast. When I got to the station I was told that Leo Chance had been waiting on the telephone for almost an hour for me to arrive there. He wanted to talk to me urgently and said he would wait on the telephone until I arrived.

He did not congratulate me if I remember correctly. He immediately asked me if I would bury the hatchet with Claude Wathey and form a government. I told him I would form a government with anyone who could bring parties from Curacao to the table who represented at least eight seats in parliament.

Mr. Chance told me that he and Mr. Wathey had the eight seats on Curacao already. This was only two hours after the polls had closed on the five islands. Chance obviously had done his job. He had been in contact with all possible parties which could form a government, except the National Party obviously. Two days later on Curacao Chance

proved to me that he could deliver the eight from Curacao at a meeting between parties in the Plaza Hotel. All of this took place without the press even being aware of what was going on.

On December 5th, Maria who was then Prime Minister came to help us celebrate Saba Day accompanied by her beloved husband the late Niels Liberia. While the ceremonies were going on we had already negotiated a coalition and signed the agreement at Captains Quarters Hotel with Maria sitting two tables away.

The next morning Maria invited me to have breakfast and informed me that someone from her party would be in contact with me in a few days about forming a coalition. I felt obliged to tell her the truth. In retrospect I can understand how upset she was. She was not to blame. I am certain that within her party someone should have been doing what Chance had done. The political culture on Curacao put the National Party to rest on its laurels after having been declared the great winner. As a student of warfare and a disciple of Machiavelli I realize that you are most vulnerable after a great victory.

Our political relations were off to a rocky start. I knew all about Maria's political history to that point. I knew her personally as well. However I had always been in island politics in the Windward Islands. I was only now starting to work with political parties at the National level.

In the years between 1986 and 1988 Maria and her National Party was in opposition to our coalition and there was hell to pay with Maria as opposition leader. Holland is now talking about "Strong Women" as if they need encouragement. Maria taught us what it means to be a strong woman all the way back in the nineteen seventies. She came from generations of strong women who had to survive on this small rock while their husbands were roaming the seas of the world.

Often, in parliament I would hear Leo Chance referring to Albertine's girl and Plantz' boy (Rufus MacWilliam). He was doing it sarcastically of course and to draw attention to Maria's Windward Islands heritage. I could not blame him totally. Much of the Curacao electorate were unaware that Maria's father was from St.Maarten (Louis Peters) and her mother Albertine Hassell was from Saba. A taxi driver on Curacao nearly threw me out of his taxi one night on the way from the airport because of Maria. He was totally amazed that I did not know that Maria was from Banda Abou. I later heard him telling the other taxi drivers in front of the hotel what a stupid man I was that I did not even know where Maria was from.

Maria's parents like many other Windward Islanders had met on Curacao and Aruba while working for the oil refineries. Because of the language issue the people of the Windward Islands formed close bonds of friendship and marriage on Aruba and Curacao.

However Maria grew up on Curacao. Her political base and career are from that island. While we appreciate that her roots are from St.Maarten and Saba, we must recognize that she owes allegiance to where she was born, grew up, and was elected time and again.

Senator Kenneth van Putten of St.Eustatius, my old friend and sparring partner, used to tease her in parliament about her Windward Islands background. Sometimes while searching for the proper word in Papiamentoe she would use an English expression. Kenneth would turn to me and say loud enough for Maria to hear; "That's Albertine talking." And Maria pretending to be angry would look in our direction and say;"Look all you two. Don't humbug up my head, you hear."

It is remarkable how certain things from your youth remain with you throughout life. It is as the author Charlson L. Ong wrote of his Chinese upbringing, "The words of infancy, the vessel of one's soul, kept in some ancient sanctuary for fear of being lost in a thousand journeys across strange lands."

After 1988 we worked in coalition with Maria. I must give her credit for defending her coalition as strong as she would defend her own National Party. She tried to keep the islands together in a period when the smaller islands were traumatized by the departure of Aruba. The smaller islands believed very much in the Netherlands Antilles, with Aruba. The Windward Islanders had helped to build Aruba. Through their elected representatives on the PPA party on Aruba and the Democrat Party on Curacao, Windward Islanders had enjoyed a relatively large measure of influence and authority disproportionate to the size of their populations on Aruba and Curacao.

The Minister of Finance was usually from Aruba and looked favorably on requests for financial aid from the smaller islands. Aruba was the balance needed in the political relationships at the National government level.

After 1986 the disintegration of the Netherlands Antilles started almost immediately. The Central Government officials charged with administering finances looked at the "Solidarity Fund" as a sort of separate government for the smaller islands and we got stuck with a contribution to that fund equivalent to that which the Central Government had spent on the small islands in 1982.

Maria on a recent visit to the Windward Islands in a statement lamented the animosity between politicians on the various islands and the acrimonious way in which the country was being broken up into separate constitutional units. While I can understand her point, the last eight years as Commissioner of Saba I felt oppressed by the Central Government. So much so, that with the same enthusiasm which I had campaigned in 1994 to keep the islands together, I felt pressed to prepare Sabans to leave the Netherlands Antilles even if it meant asking for complete independence from The Netherlands. An option, which could still be considered if the December 15h, 2008 agreement is not reached.

Saba honored Maria in 2005 with a plaque on Saba Day. We did this in the presence of another great Saban Father Simon Wilson. The ecumenical service was held in the Anglican church in Windwardside.

I was sitting next to Maria when Father Simon walked in. As he was busy greeting the congregation, I asked her; "How do you think he would do in Curacao politics?" Without hesitation she replied; "Boy I 'fraid' he."

So there you have it. This justifies Maria's recent statement that there are still good relations between the people of the islands, in contrast to the acrimonious relations between the politicians.

In Holland recently at a lovely church in the 'Spaansche Hof', they were telling us of the Curacao priest 'Pastoor Wilson' who had filled up their church for the first time in ages.

After the ceremony I informed them privately that a correction was in place as he was from Saba. They were amazed and asked me how a Saban priest could lead the Curacao people like a pied piper wherever he preached in The Netherlands. I felt obliged then to tell them about Albertine's daughter Maria who for many years had managed to do the same thing in the political field. At that point they concluded that I must be some joker

who wanted to claim everyone for Saba as they were certain that Maria was from Curacao.

Much, if not most, of what I have today I got from Curacao. Whether it is discipline and values I got from Jongenstad Brakkeput on the shores of the lovely Spaansche Water. Whether it is the education I got from the Fraters of Mgr. Zwijsencollege and Radulphus College. Whether it is money I won with the Lottery and on a throw of the dice invested it in the Curacao mining company and did well, thank you.

While outspoken on political issues I hold absolutely no animosity against the people of Curacao and can only think back with fond memories of my teenage years spent there.

Once on St.Maarten in a heated debate with a gang of Wathey's supporters at the Sea View Hotel bar, his friend and sometimes driver/bodyguard Mr. Nel Bergland told the hotheads who threatened me "Quarrel with him all you want, but touch him and you got me to fight."

I will say the same of Maria. Despite the political differences we may have had in opposition and in coalition, we maintained a good personal relationship and I can still consider her as a personal friend.

After the islands settle in to their new political status' and the Netherlands Antilles will only be a memory, I am hopeful that The Kingdom of The Netherlands in their quest for strong women will start a "Senioren Convent" for the Dutch West Indian islands and that Albertine's girl will be asked to lead such a "Senioren Convent." After all she proved her salt as a woman, as Prime Minister, as loving wife and mother. The islands will still need the experience and wisdom of one who recognizes that the people of the islands do not have any differences among themselves.

Maria, girl, May God bless you and I thank you on behalf of the people of Saba whom I have been privileged to represent until recently, for all you did to help us in times of need.

Will Johnson