



# the Practitioner's page

## Sir Fred Phillips of St. Kitts and Nevis Could the Eastern Caribbean states benefit from a federal government?

**Sir Fred Phillips** is a former Governor of St. Kitts and Nevis and the head of the St. Kitts and Nevis Constitution Task Force as well as the Chairman of the Constitutional Reform Commission of Antigua and Barbuda. He was interviewed in Ottawa by Federations Editor Karl Nerenberg.

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### Forum:

What is your own interest in the question of federalism in the eastern Caribbean?

### Phillips:

I'm a former governor of St. Kitts and Nevis. When I was governor it was called St. Kitts-Nevis-Anguilla. But in 1967 Anguilla seceded from this unitary state. And in 1983 when independence came, the two constituent units who formed an independent state were St. Kitts and Nevis. They are described in the constitution as the federation but in fact it is not a true federation. And one of the problems that has arisen in connection with the state is that because they are not a true federation – only one of the two states has a legislature and an administration. The other state, St. Kitts, does not have a local legislature and an administration. And the feeling is that in a true federation all states should have a legislature and an administration.

I have been involved in the last six years or so in a commission appointed in 1997 to recommend changes in the constitution. And in 1998 the commission, of which I was chairman, made specific recommendations in which we suggested that there should be two (Nevis) separate island administrations: the Nevis administration and the St. Kitts administration.

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### Forum:

What is the interest in federalism in the entire Caribbean region? How would you characterize the interest in federalism, or is there none?

### Phillips:

You ask some very interesting questions because I was the cabinet secretary of what was then known as the Federation of the West Indies. This federation was formed in 1958 and was dissolved in 1962. It comprised Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, Grenada, St. Vincent, St. Lucia, Dominica, St. Kitts, Antigua and Montserrat. So that there was an interest in federalism way back. And indeed there are many people who still feel

that the problems that are coming to the Caribbean at the present time are coming because of the breakup of the federation. You understand what I mean? When there was a federation we had one government, one federal government and all these other governments or island governments. In other words, when dealing for instance with diplomatic representation in capitals abroad there'd be one federal ambassador, or high commissioner. Now there are high commissioners and ambassadors for every independent country. So the cost of that is phenomenal. And so there has been an increase and I think there are several people who still feel that we should once again federate.

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### Forum:

If this federation were to occur, what could they build on? What might exist now that could be a basis for a subsequent federation?

### Phillips:

For one thing, we have what is known as the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States, which is the smaller islands that were once associated states, such as Grenada, St. Vincent, St. Lucia, Dominica, Antigua and St. Kitts. And that is a sub-region which could form the nucleus of this new federation. That organization, together with Barbados, Trinidad and maybe the British Virgin Islands in due course, and Montserrat, could become a new federation.

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### Forum:

Talking about the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States, what functions does it now carry out that resemble those of a federal government?

### Phillips:

Well, in terms of economics it has several. There's an Eastern Caribbean Central Bank, which is a very important organization. It controls monetary policies and that sort of thing and we have one currency in those islands and that currency is administered by the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank, which is located in St. Kitts. And it carries out a number of other economic functions. There are a number of grants administered from the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States headquartered in St. Lucia. So it does have the makings of a federal organization.

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**Forum:**

What is the level of understanding in the population in general of a federation or the concept of federating? How is that viewed by people the people at the grass roots level?

**Phillips:**

That's a very interesting question. At the grass roots level many people at the time of federation did not grasp or fully understand what federation was all about. I think there was a breakdown in communication in the sense that sufficient was not done, in my judgment, to make the man in the street in all the territories aware of the values and the full objective of federation.

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**Forum:**

And what sort of things could be done now to avoid repeating the errors of the 1958 federation?

**Phillips:**

Well, a great deal is being done. Many of the prime ministers and governments are actively informing people of the values of coming together, and people understand that the world is changing. I mean of course federation was in 1958, that's almost 50 years ago. People are more tending to come together, whether it's the European Union or whether it's NAFTA. And so the whole idea of union is becoming something that people can understand. Politicians are trying to get people to understand this. But it's difficult for people not to be insular if they don't travel. Air travel has made a difference for many, but we hope that as time goes on everyone gets a greater understanding of what the ideas of federalism are.

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**Forum:**

Now as you're talking about bringing together the countries of the Caribbean in one quasi-federation, one country that has some federal characteristics. Yet in Saint Kitts and Nevis we see the threat of separation. What can be done about that at this point?

**Phillips:**

I don't know the answer to your question. Unfortunately, there is provision for separation in the St. Kitts and Nevis constitution. Section 1.13 provides that the island of Nevis has a right to secede. And so all that can be done is to try to persuade the authorities in Nevis that it is not in their interest to secede. But these are times when people are coming together rather than tearing themselves apart. So short of trying to persuade them that this is not in the interest of the Caribbean or the wider community, I don't think there's anything else to be done.

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**Forum:**

What do you hope to accomplish by coming to a federal country such as Canada and a country friendly with the Caribbean in terms of developing the notion of federalism in your region?

**Phillips:**

Well, you ask a very difficult question. I have been a federalist from the beginning and I continue to be a federalist, and always will be a federalist. I don't believe that in the Caribbean



we will get anywhere with continuing these separate states. In a book that I published a year or so ago on constitutional law I wrote: "... the forces of division are today more actively at work than at any other period in our history and that the shortest route to persistent poverty and economic deterioration and catastrophe is by way of the continued insistence in trying to populate the present multiplicity of jurisdictions as separate independent states on the world scene. Surely our politicians are wise enough to take a hard look at the United States and Canada, from both of which they so often request aid and technical assistance, and to observe how each of these two vast countries have come together as one nation to further the interests of its citizens. The leaders in the Caribbean have deemed it fit in the space of 38 years since 1962 to install three presidents, nine governors general, six governors, as well as 12 prime ministers, one premier, four chief ministers and between 150 and 200 ministers of government as the top administrative machinery for a population of about five million. That is less than one half of the population of the city of Shanghai in China. This administrative machine is what the writer was prepared to observe on visits in 1983, 1986 and 1988. The duplication of ambassadorial establishments in such capitals as London, Brussels, Ottawa, New York and Washington boggles the mind, and can only result in further depriving these pauperized states of the already scarce financial resources at their disposal." @