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RABI COUNCIL OF LEADERS
BUCKINGHAM COURT
78 BUCKINGHAM GATE
LONDON S.W.1

CONFIDENTIAL.

ADDRESS
TO THE DELEGATION
OF THE
GILBERT AND ELLICE ISLANDS GOVERNMENT

3rd June, 1975.

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Let us save time by avoiding detailed repetition of the differences between us.

But first Council would like to summarise the position.

The Council regard the Administering Power, Great Britain, as the Government which must decide on the future of Ocean Island. Also it is contrary to a Pacific Island's custom which we share with you to ask that the Gilbertese should give the Banabans their freedom.

The British have said to us, and indeed, have said to the U.N. Special Committee, that they must take your wishes into account. The Minister, Miss Lestor, has herself stressed this point to us and it is as a direct result of the Council's suggestion that we should get together with you here in London that this meeting is taking place privately between us.

It is the Council's wish, therefore, that no effort should be spared to make a frank and full appraisal of our differences and to seek a means by which our interests may coincide.

A great deal of time and effort has been expended by us both in arguing how different, or how alike, we Banabans and Gilbertese are. The Council would not wish to deny the close links that exist between us. Our forefathers were taught Christianity by Gilbertese Ministers and through the Bible in Gilbertese; since the British came to Ocean Island we have lived and worked with the Gilbertese people and shared with them a common colonial experience and even suffering and death at the hands of Britain's enemies. I am myself half Gilbertese. We are all of us here today able to discuss our differences in a common tongue : there should be no excuse for any misunderstandings.

But we need not seek the guidance of distinguished foreign anthropologists to learn what we know in our hearts. The people of all 16 atolls have a deep feeling of common identity : they know they are different from the Polynesian Ellice Islanders who have traditionally been part of the same colonial group, the GEIC; they know they are different from the Marshallese, although the Marshallese, like the people of the Gilberts, are Micronesian. And they know they are different from the Marshallese, not only because they speak a different language (as the Chief Minister pointed out in New York), but also because they do not share a common tradition - indeed the Gilbertese knew little or nothing of the Marshallese before the Europeans came to the Pacific.

So how, in this context, do we Banabans fit in?

The distinguished members of the Gilbertese delegation know that if they ask any person from Makin or from Arorae if he is Gilbertese the answer will be an unhesitating yes. They know equally well that if they put the same question to a Banaban - whether he lives on Rabi or on Ocean Island - he will answer no with at least equal certainty.

However many links may exist between us, we Banabans know that we are different from you, the Gilbertese.

As Sir Bernard Braine and Mr. John Lee say in the Report they submitted to the Foreign Secretary after they had visited our islands:

"In any event, in this day and age, what determines identity is what people believe themselves to be. We have been left in no doubt that Banabans consider themselves to be a separate people. To deny this would be to cause unhappiness and to create trouble for the future which neither the British people nor Parliament would wish in these final stages of decolonisation."

There is, perhaps, only one last question we should face before allowing this matter to rest. The Chief Minister said in New York last November that if a prospecting firm were to find oil in Maiana you could not let that discovery give rise to a question of whether or not the Maiana people should separate from the rest of the Gilbert Islands.

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The Chief Minister was, of course, quite justified in saying this. But we should all be clear about the reason why he was right. As I think we all of us here agree the people of Maiana consider themselves to be Gilbertese; that is to say that their will and determination today is to join with their fifteen fellow Gilbert Islands in forming an independent nation state. If rich oil deposits were to be discovered in Maiana tomorrow the people of that island would still be as Gilbertese as they are today. Their only motivation for seeking a separate, sovereign existence would clearly be greed and any denial they might make of their Gilbertese identity would be seen by everyone as a deliberate falsehood, a cynical pretence. Such a reaction, indeed, would be entirely uncharacteristic of the Gilbertese, and the Maiana people would be ashamed to behave in such a way.

But if the Chief Minister, or any of his colleagues, believes for one moment that the Banaban people's claim to a separate Banaban identity is a cynical pretence and a deliberate falsehood, then it would be better if that belief were clearly stated here and now.

The Council hopes that, whatever the consequences could be in political or material terms, the distinguished members of the Gilbertese delegation will accept, without reserve, our good faith and sincerity in laying claim as we do, and have always done, to a separate Banaban identity. As we all

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know, the two British Members of Parliament accept that we believe we are a separate people and feel it would be wrong to deny us our separate identity. I hope I am not breaching any confidence or misrepresenting the Minister when I quote her as saying to the Council at the end of April that she no longer wished to argue this point with us.

There were other material matters, the Minister went on to say, about which she hoped Banabans and Gilbertese would reach agreement.

To continue my previous quotation from the M.P.s' report to the Rt. Hon. James Callaghan.

".... we cannot believe that in the face of the evidence regarding identity the British Government would wish to press any argument on that score. It follows, therefore, that the real reason for their present refusal to countenance a separate existence for Ocean Island is purely economic, derives from an understandable concern for the future viability of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, but is essentially short-term since once the phosphate is exhausted Ocean Island will be virtually useless to anyone."

We would have preferred the MPs to have added that once the phosphate is exhausted Ocean Island will be virtually useless to anyone but the Banabans. Ocean Island, far from being useless to us, is central to our continuing existence

as a people. Without making our ancestral island a homeland for at least some of our people once again we must look forward to the inevitable loss of our identity as Banabans and our eventual absorption into the Fijian population. I need hardly say that our affection for the people of Fiji is second to none, but they are the first to recognise our wish to retain the Banaban identity which we have maintained through thick and thin. All they ask is that we should not carve out a separate existence in their midst; that those of our people who live on Rabi Island should play a full and equal role as citizens of the young sovereign state of Fiji.

If you look upon the Banaban people as your kinsmen then we hope you will accept our word that the only manner in which we can survive as a people, given our unique situation, deposited by the colonial power on Rabi and dependent on Banaba for our people's survival as a distinct people, is for our island to become separate once again from the 16 Gilbert atolls and enter an independent existence in associated status with our respected Pacific neighbour, Fiji.

The Council hopes, as I have said, that you will accept what we say as being said in all sincerity and with good-will towards the Gilbertese people. We hope you will also accept that in agreeing in principle to help us, the Fijian Government and people are simply recognising their 30 year old association with our people. They mean no disrespect to the Gilbertese people with whom they look forward to a close and friendly

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relationship as between sovereign neighbouring States in a long future which will make our colonial experience seem brief indeed.

The Council is confident that the Gilbertese people and Government will listen to their Pacific neighbours and will not allow the colonial power to stand between us any longer.

If the true problem, as Miss Lestor appears ready to concede, is an economic or financial one, then let us talk of these matters now, confident in the knowledge that if we come to an agreement together the administering power will be unable to resist the consensus we produce between us. We are quite confident that the British Parliament will not allow the British Government to evade its responsibilities towards the peoples of the area. The MPs' report emphasises the wider problem of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. They went to the Pacific as our guests, but as the Chief Minister will be the first to recognise they have not looked at our problem in isolation : they have appealed to the British Government in the strongest terms on behalf of us all. If I may quote again:

"In short, we believe that because of phosphates the GEIC has been neglected, and that not only the Banabans but the Gilbertese and Ellice Islanders too have good grounds for complaint as they move towards independence without assurance of compensatory sources of revenue essential if

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that independence is not to be blighted from the outset. Since it is British policy nowadays to permit only a short stage between the granting of full internal self-government and sovereign independence there is very little time left in which the British Government, responsible as it is for guiding these small communities to early independence, can make the radical reassessment of the position which we consider imperative and, irrespective of the cases now before the High Court, persuade its partners in the BPC to find the necessary resources to make that independence worth having."

".... we are quite clear that if the present unhappy situation is to be resolved successfully then there will have to be a financial settlement, irrespective of the outcome of these cases, as to the division of the remaining phosphate money, provision for making up any shortfall of revenues of the present GEIC Government and their successors, and for some rehabilitation of Ocean Island."

What, then, are our financial problems?

Yours are great ones, but quite simply stated. As the MPs have said, you must have the compensatory sources of revenue essential if your independence is not to be blighted from the outset. One, very short term, part of the answer is for your Revenue Equilization Reserve Fund to continue to receive phosphate royalties until the mining has ended, that is, according to the British delegate to the U.N. Special

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Committee, until 1978. The long term, and only satisfactory, answer for you is that your development plans should come to fruition.

The difficulty at first sight appears to be that for us Banabans to be able to solve our own financial and political problems would seem to clash directly with the short-term part of the answer to your own problems. However vital it may be for us, the Banaban people, to begin to resettle ourselves as a community on Ocean Island, we cannot live in a landscape of jagged coral pinnacles. We must restore as much of our island as is humanly possible.

The cost of this, based upon the Report by a Committee of Experts Appointed to Investigate the Possibilities of Rehabilitation of Mined Phosphate Lands on Nauru which was presented in 1966 and which has been up-dated by our economic advisers, will amount to \$A68,390.- per acre. Restoring the whole of Ocean Island's mined areas (1,190 acres) would therefore cost \$A81.4 million at today's prices.

In the face of this daunting figure, the price to be paid for undoing the damage caused by 78 years of phosphate mining, the Council would like the honourable members of the Gilbertese delegation to understand our determination to restore the maximum area possible of our island. The sums of money we are struggling to obtain will be invested, not in Banks, but in the task of making Ocean Island a place where our people can once again live and thrive.

There would now appear to be perhaps less than three years of phosphate revenue left. Every cent of this must be allocated to the job of restoration if our objective of creating a home for our people on Banaba is to be achieved.

As this capital sum - the amount of revenue which your Government evidently wishes to continue levying as taxation on our remaining phosphate land - is the sum of money which stands between us and agreement on our political future, it is a pity that we cannot state with any certainty exactly how much is involved. As we all know, the operations of the BPC are shrouded in secrecy: we are not even allowed to know at what price our phosphate is being sold to Australia and New Zealand. And of course we cannot tell what will happen to phosphate prices in the future.

However, both you and we know the revenue we are each receiving every month. We can therefore gain an approximate idea of the total sum at issue between us. By putting the information we each have together, and taking account of the new leases as well as the old, a figure could be guessed for the purposes of these talks.

Gentlemen, there is at least one other, very important party to our joint financial difficulties. We must not leave the British Government out of our thoughts. What does Britain stand to lose or gain from Ocean Island becoming independent?

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In the first place, of course, there are the two actions we Banabans have brought against the Crown and the Commissioners. But they will follow their course whatever our political future.

If Britain said to us today, Gentlemen of the Rabi Council of Leaders, we grant you your wish - you may have your sovereignty over Ocean Island tomorrow, what would this cost the British Treasury?

The answer is clear enough. The British taxpayer would have to meet any deficit in the GEIC budget. They would have to meet such deficits because that is Britain's responsibility as the administering power. Nor would Britain be able to insist on reducing GEIC expenditure on the vital development plans which your people rely on for an economically as well as politically independent future. It would not be in Britain's own interests to do so because they have already undertaken to continue grants-in-aid to the GEIC indefinitely after independence and after the exhaustion of Banaban phosphates. This is a point of vital importance to our discussion, so that Council wishes each member of the Gilbertese delegation to study the details of this British undertaking. A copy of an article by Mr. Ken McGregor which appeared in the February 1971 edition of the "Pacific Islands Monthly" will be made available to our Gilbertese friends. From the last three paragraphs of this article, it will be seen that the GEIC has been made the exception to the general Treasury rule that grants-in-aid to make up budget deficits cease on independence. We have

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referred to the Editor of PIM who confirms that the source of this information was a senior official of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Britain is therefore committed to doing all in her power to make the Gilbert Islands self-supporting. It is this objective which the Council suggest is of overriding importance to the Government and people of the Gilbert Islands.

Knowing this to be the case, the British Treasury evidently considers it their duty to the British taxpayer to delay as long as they possibly can the moment when this undertaking has to be implemented. Every cent which goes into the Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund from Banaban phosphates represents a saving for the British. The Council understands the British Treasury's policy only too well, but we would strongly suggest that it is not in the interests of the Gilbertese people and Government to give this policy their support.

Provided they obtain an immediate and temporary cash advantage, the British are not concerned that Ocean Island will become a deserted, uninhabited and uninhabitable coral outcrop; they do not care whether the Banaban people maintain their identity as a people or whether they are slowly but surely absorbed into the Fijian community 1600 miles away where the British themselves dumped us 30 years ago.

The Council do not believe that the Gilbertese can possibly

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allow themselves to be identified with this soul-less, mercenary attitude. And even if they could, we Banabans are convinced

allow themselves to be identified with this soul-less, mercenary attitude. And even if they could, we Banabans are convinced that the Gilbertese will see that their best interests will be served by having to their West a living, thriving and friendly, though independent, community of Banabans who will form a natural link between them and the Fijian people in the centuries ahead which we must all face together as sovereign states.

We hope and pray that our Gilbertese friends will help us Banabans play our part as a people in the future of the South Pacific, rather than help the British Treasury on the other side of the world to make a minute saving in its expenditure.

Let us try to imagine what the future would have in store for our peoples if we are able to agree here in London to present a united, Pacific, front to the British Government. First and foremost, an independent Ocean Island would mean, as I have said before, a partially restored island supporting a Banaban community who would be closely linked with the remainder of their people living as Fijian citizens on Rabi. To sustain our community of Ocean Island we will develop a joint fishing enterprise with our neighbours on Nauru. On Banaba itself we will replant coconuts and between the rows of coconuts on the restored part of the island we will plant fresh vegetables. In this way our community on Banaba would become self-supporting and the advantages of close economic

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links with our neighbours in the Gilberts will become obvious and necessary. There will be jobs for Gilbertese in our fishing industry and we will hope to find a market in the Gilberts for our surplus supplies of fresh vegetables. Although the fertility of Rabi has been much exaggerated in the past, we shall have land to spare there and we foresee the possibility of joint developments with the Gilbertese in the production of coconut oil and in other ventures. We have no doubt that the widest economic cooperation between us would have the full support of the present independent countries in the area, Fiji and Nauru.

Gentlemen, without sovereignty over our island of Banaba and the disposal of the remaining phosphate revenues we could not restore the island. It would remain derelict and unproductive, a constant reminder of one of the worst examples of colonial exploitation in the world. And this sterile outcome would have been achieved for what purpose? Simply in order to remove - for a few months only - a burden from the shoulders of the British Treasury.

It is our appeal to you that we use this occasion to reach agreement. If we succeed in doing so, we have no doubt that the economic independence we must all strive for will come. As I have pointed out, Britain will be obliged to give her full financial support to the Gilberts and provide the technical assistance which will eventually remove the need for continuing grants-in-aid. I should add that from the talks which the

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Council has had with the Australian and New Zealand Governments we have no doubt that both countries are prepared to join with our island peoples in making certain that the political and economic future of the South Pacific is secured.