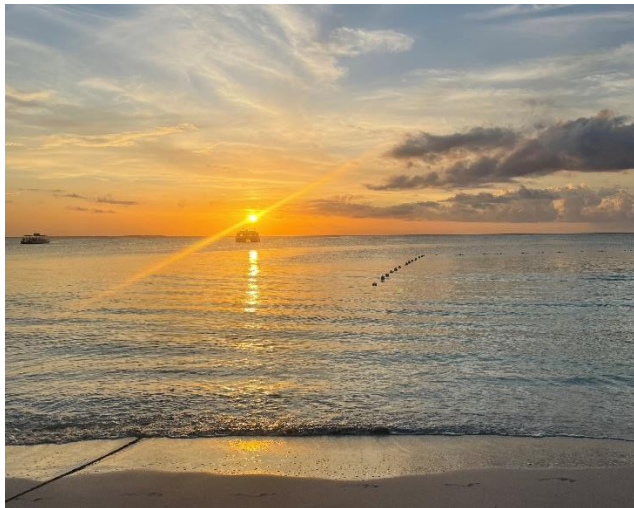


My month in Turks and Caicos? Beautiful... But Britain's feckless legacy remains

Americanisation prevails in British Overseas Territories likes Turks and Caicos, ushered in by dubious fiscal regimes and UK led financial secrecy. For things to change, Starmer mustn't shy away from a more interventionist approach.

By Lily Wallen



October saw the UK's commitment to its Overseas Territories make headlines. As Starmer [relinquished British control](#) of the Chagos Islands and made a shaky appearance at the [Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting](#), it became apparent that the fresh Labour government will maintain the business-as-usual approach to Commonwealth allies and Crown Territories. That is, sidestepping Commonwealth demands for reparative justice just to periodically reassure Britain that its hold of over a dozen Overseas Territories isn't going anywhere.

Evoking fears about waning sovereignty and diminishing national identity- all buzzwords in our post-Brexit, pro-soundbite political eco system- Britain does a disservice to its potential on the global stage by letting public opinion crowd around the implications of relinquished territories like the Chagos Islands. In the Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI), tropical Crown land in the British West Indies where I spent the final weeks of summer, this myopic relationship between Britain and its Overseas Territories is thinly veiled behind pastel beach hut frontage and resort sprawl.

A should be resurrected set of islands, Turks and Caicos lies in the wake of direct rule from Westminster following a 2009 Foreign Office [Commission of Inquiry](#) that uncovered a governance structure steeped in corruption. Arriving over a decade on from the reinstatement of self-governance to TCI, my visual expectations of Providenciales, the most populous and developed Caicos Island, famously monetised under its "Beautiful by Nature" slogan, were somewhat fractured by the brutality of its 12 storey Ritz-Carlton resort. The resort-cum-casino-cum-beach club towering over my arrival to the island buckled my assumption that financial secrecy and questionable procurements of Crown land were a thing of TCI past.

Throned at the very centre of Providenciales's holiday-making hub Grace Bay, I'm sure The Ritz-Carlton has eased the island's especially pricey tourism market. But its disruptive presence on the island, so intensely out of keeping with its Lucayan backdrop, reeks of the continued synergy between TCI's alluring fiscal deregulation and unscrupulous foreign investors.



In 2012, the very same year that self-governance was restored to the island, the Turks and Caicos Islands Government (TCIG) received [\\$500 million](#) from hotelier Desarrollos Hotelco in exchange for the prime land where The Ritz-Carlton now stands. Within another two years, TCIG

amended the state [Development Manual](#) without public consultation, increasing the island's maximum building height from 7 to 12 storeys. Low and behold, by 2018 it was publicised that The Ritz-Carlton brand would soon [break ground](#) along Grace Bay's shoreline, developing TCI's largest resort yet. 12 storeys high, that is.

Neither this nor the derelict piece of land sat opposite The Ritz-Carlton under the signage 'Mac n Cheeze Adventures' are symptomatic of a healthy economy. That governance in TCI remains compromised, bound to shaky financial investments made on the basis of their preferential tax regime, was hardly obscured by Governor Ric Todd, the Crown's representative in TCI at the time, who insisted the multi-million-dollar deal was [a "vindication"](#) of Britain's reformation of TCI politics.



To the contrary, TCIG perpetually [thwarted legal action](#) taken by established investors on the island who warned that the government's legislative slant towards upward building would do little to sustainably stimulate the economy, cheapening land valued so highly precisely because of its exclusively unspoiled reputation.

To a similar end, the [Young Corporate Alliance](#), a local pressure group that promotes the economic empowerment of young entrepreneurs on the island, were left high and dry when they questioned the hastiness of KPMG's impact assessment of the Ritz-Carlton project. They insisted that long-term socio-economic implications hadn't been explored in depth, warning that forgoing the employment of locals would do serious damage to the economy.

Delivered at the sunset of British direct rule, the \$500 million deal should've been the standard bearer for transparency and accountability. Yet The Ritz-Carlton behemoth is a towering symptom of a fiscal culture that competes for high-net-worth individuals and corporations at the expense of local people. Economic growth led by the tourism industry continues to vastly outstrip the development of social infrastructure and public services in TCI, contributing to the island's exponential [serious crime rates](#) and [disparate wealth gap](#).

Stakeholders shouted "[economic diversification](#)" in defence of The Ritz-Carlton's immensity. Its reality is the further entrenchment of Americanised mass tourism. Yes, expensive developments drive up GDP and attract future investment. But don't we know by now that economic growth means nothing if not paired with a sustainable employment landscape and the development of public services?

While the Foreign Office may have firmly diagnosed TCI's problems in 2009 as it imposed direct rule, developments like The Ritz-Carlton and the island's staggering cost-of-living suggest that Britain's ability to develop a treatment plan wasn't so strong. With greater visibility and attentiveness though, British Overseas Territories are a pertinent vehicle through which new leadership in the Foreign Office could revitalise global Britain.

Starmer must seize the opportunity to wave in a new era of responsible diplomacy; recoiling at the prospect of reparative justice only perpetuates a global framework in which British Overseas Territories are subjects rather than built in allies.

Admittedly, it could be a slightly awkward line to toe for a party trying their best to please a diverse electoral coalition. But to sceptical right-wingers, reparative justice could be framed as much more than just an admission of guilt. In practice it looks like education programmes, climate finance, and consultancy for public services, building an international network of British led expertise. Not only are nations like TCI crying out for this support, but after a decade of our lowest foreign relations ebb in modern times, quite frankly, Britain needs this too.