



Social Studies: Notes

Local government in The Bahamas



Vocabulary words:

Administration – management of affairs

revenue – government income

Coroner – an official who determines cause of death

budget – an allowance of money

Justice of the Peace (JP)– someone who is appointed by the government to deal with certain legal affairs



Family island Administrators

In the Bahamas, all of the islands except New Providence are referred to as 'Family Islands'. During the early period of settlement, the management of affairs, or administration, on each island was carried out by resident justices.

They were responsible to the government's Chief Justice. In 1908 this system changed: the justices on the islands were replaced by *District Commissioners*. Later they were called *Family Island Commissioners*. An Act of Parliament in 1996 brought about the change from Commissioners to Family Island Administrators.

- Each Commissioner is at the centre of the island's system of administration. He or she is the chief representative of government on that island, and acts as the link between government and the people.

There are 32 local District Councils in The Bahamas living and working in the family Islands.

Each Administrator is provided with a residence. He or she has many responsibilities. The Administrator keeps in touch with the people of the island at all times, and is also familiar with the policies of central government.

- **Robert:** Good afternoon, Sir. My name is Robert. I'd like to interview you about your work.
- **Administrator:** Good afternoon Robert. I'm the administrator of your island, Exuma. What would you like to know?
- **Robert:** I'd like to ask you about your background first, if I may. Are you a native of this island?
- **Administrator:** No, Robert. I'm from New Providence, but now I live and work here.
- **Robert:** How did you get the job of Administrator here?
- **Administrator:** I was appointed on the advice of the Governor-General and the Director of Local Government.
- **Robert:** Administrator, what are your responsibilities on Exuma?
- **Administrator:** They're varied. As the legal representative of government on the island, I have a judicial function. That means I work as a magistrate and Justice of the Peace, or JP. I preside over some criminal cases, and can impose a prison sentence of up to six months. It's also my responsibility to decide whether there is sufficient evidence to commit an accused person to stand trial in the Supreme Court in Nassau.
- **Robert:** What other duties do you perform?
- **Administrator:** In minor civil matters such as someone breaking a contract, or a landlord-and-tenant dispute, I have no power to levy fines of up to \$289. And if someone dies suddenly, or in suspicious circumstances I must act as Coroner, to decide what the cause of death was. I'm also consulted if someone goes missing and I have the power to order an immediate search and investigation.
- **Robert:** What about tax-collecting – isn't that also one of your jobs?
- **Commissioner:** Yes, Robert, I'm responsible to the Government Treasurer in New Providence for collecting taxes, or revenues, on the island. I also distribute funds on behalf of some government ministries and departments.

The Post Office on the island is my responsibility too – the sale of stamps, money orders, and the operation of the Post Office Savings Bank. I'm also chairman of the local Board of Works.

Robert: Do you enjoy your work?

Administrator: I find my job interesting because I never know what will happen next! One day I may be signing requests for licenses for shops, and the next I'm issuing birth or death certificates. As a JP I'm also able to conduct marriage ceremonies, and sign or endorse papers like passport forms or the deeds of a will.

Robert: How do you feel about your role in our island?

Administrator: My main aim is to help the people of Exuma. I enjoy meeting the islanders when I attend various fairs, rallies and other community activities. If there's a particular problem I take a keen interest, and it's my responsibility to keep the government in New Providence informed of everything that's going on in the island.

Robert: Thank you for talking to me, Administrator. It's clear that your job carries a lot of responsibility, and the people of the community depend on you for many things.

District Council

- On each of the Family Islands, repair work on all government facilities is the responsibility of the Local Board of Works. These facilities include roads, street lighting, docks, and government buildings. The members of the Board of Works are elected by the people of the island.
- Each member is nominated by at least two people, and then an election is held to decide which of the nominees will become members of the Board.
- The Administrator is the Chairman of the Board. The members of the Board serve as a link between the people of the island and the Administrator.
- It is possible that, in the future, the Local Board of Works will be re-organized as a local government body, headed by a Mayor, who will take on some of the Administrator's present responsibilities.
- The Local District Council receives a sum of money, or budget, from central government, to be used in managing the affairs of the island.