

Going to the Dogs, Isle Declares Independence

By ERNESTO A. OSTRO
NC News Service

London—(NC)—Hot on the heels of Rhodesia's final break with Britain has come another Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) — This time right in the middle of London.

The Isle of Dogs, 617 acres and 11,000 souls in the heart of the River Thames dockland, has informed Prime Minister Harold Wilson and his government that the isle—really a peninsula—is free and independent.

The UDI has, in the past several weeks, already inspired more serious thinking about inner-city problems than the Greater London Council has evinced for years.

The fiery imagination of a dozen or so leaders in this decaying semi-slum, where the once-illustrious West India docks now lie crumbling and virtually deserted, has injected new life and determination into the community.

The islanders, led by their president, Ted Johns, a 37-year-old clerk, have been proclaiming for some time that theirs is one of the most neglected areas in London. Public transportation is hopelessly inadequate, they say; one of the two local schools has been closed for almost two years and children have to travel miles across to the "mainland" every day.

"The choking grip of bureaucracy is strangling us," said President Johns.

The bureaucrats are the Tower Hamlets local council, one of many local governing units within the Greater London Council.

In a familiar pattern, public services are neglected and private investment — whether in housing or industry or business — is discouraged. Meanwhile, traditional industries — the docks, gradually being replaced by more modern facilities nearer the mouth of the River Thames — are declining.

Appeals to the Tower Hamlets Council were answered with polite assurances and inaction.

So the inhabitants declared independence unilaterally, appointed Johns president and named two prime ministers — each a working dockhand, and organized a symbolic blocking

of the two drawbridges that connect the peninsula to the rest of London.

Prime Minister Wilson acknowledged their application for freedom, but declined to cede independence.

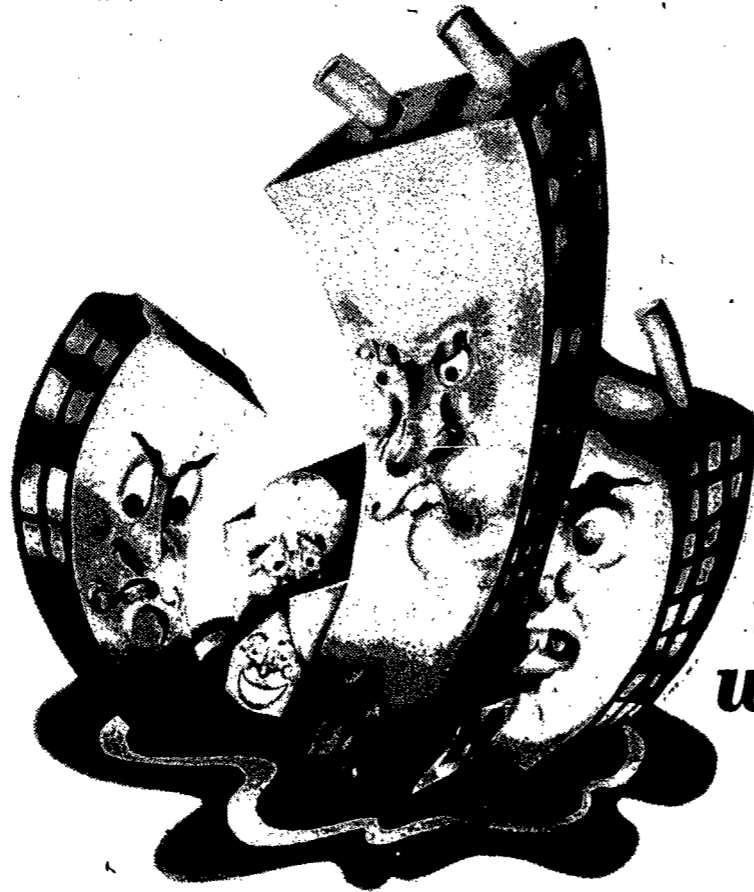
Nor were the islanders all of one mind. The declaration of independence almost at once spawned a loyalist faction, swearing its fealty to Queen and country.

President Johns answered the

loyalists with a proclamation from government house:

"We are a democratically elected government and we intend to do things for ourselves that the authorities never did.

Our main priorities are better transport services, better education, more shopping facilities, and lower rents. For years we've had to put up with appalling conditions. Now we're going to do something about it."



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