

BRITISH GUIANA SETBACK

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Not.

POLITICAL "MARKING TIME" NEEDED

COMMISSION'S ADVICE

The report of the commission which went to British Guiana in January to consider what changes were required in the colony's constitution, which was suspended in October, 1953, was published yesterday as a White Paper (Cmd. 9274, Stationery Office, 3s.).

Its main conclusion is that British Guiana, with its precarious economy, cannot afford another crisis of the kind that developed in 1953, and that there is no alternative but to recommend a period of marking time in the advance towards self-government. The length of this period will depend upon the extent to which the people of British Guiana, including the leaders of the People's Progressive Party, can be brought to realize that the "futile and deliberately disruptive policies for which the P.P.P. at present stands are no basis for the future constitutional progress of their country."

SETBACK TO PROGRESS

The commission is satisfied that the setback to orderly constitutional progress in British Guiana is due not to defects in the constitution, but to the fact that the P.P.P. leaders proved themselves to be "relentless and unscrupulous in their determination to pervert the authority of Government to their own disruptive and undemocratic ends." As long as the present P.P.P. leadership and policies remain, responsible government cannot be restored without the certainty of another crisis.

The members of the commission, which addressed its report to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, were Sir James Robertson (chairman), Sir Donald Jackson (chief justice of the Windward and Leeward Islands), Mr. George Woodcock (assistant general secretary, T.U.C.) and Mr. R. E. Radford, of the Colonial Office (secretary). During the two months it spent in British Guiana the commission received some 220 memoranda from individuals and associations, of which 160 were examined orally, and in addition 80 witnesses gave oral evidence.

At the outset the P.P.P. executive decided to boycott the commission, but, states the report, "we do not believe that we were materially handicapped by this attitude." The commission had access to reports of all proceedings in the State Council and the House of Assembly, obtained a complete series of the party newspaper, *Thunder*, and heard recordings of broadcast speeches by P.P.P. Ministers.

THE ECONOMIC PICTURE

The report opens with a general picture of conditions in the colony. The economy of the country, it states, depends principally on agriculture, which provides about two-thirds of the exports and employment for 40 per cent. of the working population. Sugar accounts for more than half of these exports. The general economic picture is one of an unremitting and costly struggle against geographical and physical difficulties. British Guiana can hardly be much more economically than a comparatively poor country, unless further mineral resources of really important proportions are discovered. Surveys to discover the true potentialities of the interior must be vigorously pursued, but the immediate need is for more farm land for the growing population on the coast. This will mean expensive flood protection, drainage and irrigation works, and will only make a slow contribution to economic problems which

affect the political atmosphere. The commission is convinced that the establishment of a class of peasant proprietors is well worth while.

At the end of 1952 the population of British Guiana was estimated at about 450,000, of whom 45 per cent. were East Indians and 36 per cent. Africans. Since the East Indian element began to play a great part in the life of the colony, racial tension increased, and the report does not share the view of the Waddington Commission that a comprehensive loyalty to British Guiana can be stimulated among people of such diverse origins.

DESIRE FOR IMPROVEMENTS

The report also does not agree with the Waddington Commission's view that local government bodies play an important part in the affairs of British Guiana. It refers to the complaints of dilatoriness in government machinery and a slow and over-centralized administration. The main features of the country are its difficult and unpromising nature, dissatisfaction and "frustration" of the people at their social and economic environment, and their strong desire for improvements.

The report then examined the recommendations of the Waddington Commission which led to the establishment of the 1953 constitution. Its main provisions were universal adult suffrage, a bi-cameral legislature consisting of a House of Assembly and State Council, an Executive Council including six Ministers chosen from the elected membership of the House of Assembly, and the retention by the Governor of reserved powers. This set-up was such that the Ministers were in effective control of the Executive Council, the policy-making body, and were virtually the Government unless the Governor used his reserved powers. The report did not find that the provisions of the constitution were unworkable, but was not satisfied with the conduct of elections, and recommended the establishment of an Electoral Commission, with an independent chairman, responsible to the Governor-in-Council for all arrangements for elections.

COMMUNIST INFLUENCE

After giving evidence of Communist influence within the P.P.P., the report states that by the time the party had secured its majority, even the most moderate of its leaders had allowed themselves to become committed to the view that the new constitution was a "fake and a trap."

On the working of the constitution, the report states that the P.P.P. Ministers, having accepted office, were constitutionally bound, as were the Governor and the *ex officio* Ministers, to recognize that the formulation of Government policy was a function of the Executive Council as a whole. After giving instances of disagreement in the council between the Governor and the *ex officio* Ministers on the one hand and the P.P.P. Ministers on the other, the report states that by the end of September, 1953, relations in the council had become impossible, and in the commission's view, it had become necessary to put an end to the uncertainty and anxiety in the colony. The fear of violence was real, the Executive Council had come nowhere near to fulfilling its constitutional role, and there was no option for the Governor but to suspend the constitution.

UNFORESEEN SITUATION

The report considers that the conditions for sound constitutional advance towards self-government do not exist in British Guiana to-day. Such conditions include strong independent trade unions and an informed public opinion. There is no sign that the P.P.P. is likely to accept the limitations of the Waddington or any similar constitution. While being unable to estimate when the progress towards self-government can be resumed, the report makes some suggestions for improvements to the constitution.

The Waddington Commission did not foresee a situation whereby all the elected Ministers in the Executive Council should belong to one party and thus be able to assume a decisive role. The commission believed that to prevent

this state of affairs there should be a balance of elected and official and nominated members of the council, with the Governor holding a casting vote. The links between the State Council and the Executive Council and House of Assembly should be strengthened by certain changes in the composition of the State Council. For instance, the Chief Secretary would join the State Council and withdraw from the Assembly.

In an appendix concerning the arson plot, which was referred to in the White Paper on the suspension of the constitution, the commission states that the reports of this plot came from hitherto reliable police informers and that the Governor and the police would have failed in their duty if they had not taken them seriously.