

THE RACIALISTS OF GUIANA

On October 31, 1963, the Secretary of State for Commonwealth and Colonial Affairs, Mr. Duncan Sandys, M.P., said to the reconvened British Guiana Independence Conference:

"British Guiana faces many difficulties but all that you have told me at this Conference and all that I saw during my visit to your country last July have convinced me that there is one problem which transcends all others - namely the growth of racialism. That is the curse of British Guiana today; the whole life of the country is poisoned and weakened by mutual suspicion and fear between the two predominant racial groups, the Indians and the Africans. This state of tension has become acute in the last few years and has led to racial murder, arson and violence. Last summer it reached the point where law and order could not be maintained without the assistance of two battalions of British soldiers."

Writing in a British Journal - the London Weekly, on March 19, 1927, Mr. H. Snell, M.P., a member of the Wilson-Snell Constitution Commission, said on the same subject:

"That the Colony has been able to reduce these complexities to something like a working plan and succeeded in creating a basis of unity in the common love of their country on the part of African, Hindoo and Chinese alike is itself a great achievement, and one that offers bright promise for the future. These separate races do, in fact, live side by side with each other, respect each other's ideals and prejudices, acknowledge allegiance to communal laws and work together for the good of the Colony. Upon a basis of this kind the Colony can build for the future without fear and without failure."

While Mr. Snell was saying this to British readers, he was saying something else "officially" as we shall see.

However, the span between Mr. Sandys' and Mr. Snell's statements is less than two generations and it is necessary for us to ask and answer certain questions: How did the change in race relations come about and when did the trouble all start? Also, who are the racialists responsible for the situation described by Mr. Sandys?

In 1927, the British Government wanted to alter the Constitution of British Guiana. The Constitution then in force gave legislative control of financial matters to the elected members of the Legislature or "Combined Court" as it was called. At that time, the elected members of the Legislature were the following:

Eustace G. Woolford	R.V. Evan-Wong	N. Cannon
H.C. Humphreys	Alfred V. Crane	E.A. Luckhoo
R.E. Brassington	P.A. Fernandes	J. Eleazer
A.R.F. Webber	J. Gonsalves	E.F. Fredericks
A.E. Seeram	Stanley DeFreitas	

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It will be seen from the composition of the Legislature in 1927, that control of the Legislature was in the hands of local people of diverse races and that the expatriate representatives of overseas capital had almost been wiped out as a political force in the Legislature.

The Wilson-Snell Commission explained the position in the following words:

"It is a general phenomenon in tropical colonies that the extension of the electorate and the greater frequency of contests makes it extremely and increasingly difficult for anyone who is not able and prepared to embark more or less whole time on the career of a politician to enter the Legislature by the avenue of the constituencies. The result is the loss to public life of no inconsiderable proportion of those who are best qualified for it, or, in other words, of the small but extremely important European class which still controls the principal agricultural and commercial activities of the Colony."

It is important to realise that Mr. Snell who remarked on the racial harmony prevailing in British Guiana in the extract quoted from the London Weekly, was the same Mr. Snell who lamented the loss to public life of the "European class". The problem in 1927 was not one of disunity among the Guianese people, it was one of loss of influence and power in Guiana by the "European class".

The British Government decided that for the "good" of British Guiana, the Constitution should be amended to give the Governor power to create a Legislature which he could control. In this way, representatives of the "European class" became nominated members along with other willing local people and the power of the Planters was re-established.

Needless to say, none of the promised development which was to follow the new Constitution took place.

After the introduction of the new Crown Colony Constitution in 1928, the "European class" in British Guiana regained and maintained control of the Legislature, the Executive, and the Civil Service until 1953, when pressure from the People's Progressive Party, which had been formed in 1950, and the logic of world developments, forced the granting of a "liberal" Constitution based on universal adult suffrage.

With the granting of the vote to every adult in British Guiana, the "European class" could no longer hope to retain control of the Legislature and, as things turned out, they also lost control of the Executive and were in danger of losing the support of the bulk of the Civil Service and the Police. They had hoped to retain control of the Executive after the election in 1953 by exploiting, as they had done in earlier times, differences between individual elected members since they did not expect any single party to win a majority. Also, they expected that, in the absence of a majority by any party in the Legislature, there would have to be some sort of "coalition" to ensure a general policy

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which took account of the expatriate interests of the "European class" as the primary concern of any Government.

Things turned out differently however, and at the first election held under adult suffrage in 1953, a single party, the People's Progressive Party, won a majority of seats and became the "Government" of the day. This meant that a single party representing GUIANESE interests was able to administer the Government through its majority in the Executive Council and make the laws it conceived best for the GUIANESE inhabitants of Guiana without having to obtain the consent of the expatriate "European class".

This is how the resultant situation was described in 1954 by the Robertson Commission which was appointed to justify the suspension of the Constitution in 1953:

"The other elements in the community - of Portuguese, Chinese and United Kingdom origin - are much smaller in numbers, though their influence is great. Members of the last-named community are anxious at the way in which the Indian and African sections have now obtained virtual domination through universal adult suffrage. In common with the Portuguese and Chinese they have no particular enthusiasm for socialist policies, but many members of all three communities have a real understanding of the aspirations of the poorer people. They realise the folly of trying to resist the trend of the times, but they are not unnaturally fearful of the more extreme policies of the People's Progressive Party. We are convinced that, in a country where leaders are needed, they could play a more valuable part than they do."

In 1954, as in 1927, a British Commission was speaking of the loss to the Government of the country of the people of "United Kingdom origin" - the "European class" of 1927 - and their great influence.

The Commission's comment about people of "United Kingdom origin" was further explained by the following statement:

"But, except for the Europeans, the P.P.P. could count on a substantial number of supporters among all races and all classes in British Guiana, with the bulk of its supporters naturally to be found among the ordinary working people."

Here, the Robertson Commission commented on and conceded the same unity of the races which Mr. Snell had found in 1927 and had commented on as "a great achievement, and one that offers bright promise for the future". The Robertson Commission, however, did not find this unity encouraging since it made the people of "United Kingdom origin" anxious. The Commission set out to lay the foundations for suspicion and animosity between the Indian and African races who had attained "virtual domination through universal adult suffrage".

The Robertson Commission served their poison in these words:

"Education is now eagerly sought by Indian parents for their children; many Indians have important shares in the economic and commercial life of the colony; the rice trade is largely in their hands from production to marketing. Their very success in these spheres has begun to awaken the fears of the African section of the population, and it cannot be denied that since India received her independence in 1947 there has been a marked self-assertiveness amongst Indians in British Guiana. Guianese of African extraction were not afraid to tell us that many Indians in British Guiana looked forward to the day when British Guiana would be a part not of the British Commonwealth but of an East Indian Empire. The result has been a tendency for racial tension to increase and we have reluctantly reached the conclusion that the amity "with which", as the Waddington Report said, "people of all races live side by side in the villages" existed more in the past; to-day the relationships are strained; they present an outward appearance which masks feelings of suspicion and distrust. We do not altogether share the confidence of the Waddington Commission that a comprehensive loyalty to British Guiana can be stimulated among peoples of such diverse origins."

Following upon the publication of the Robertson Commission's Report, the British took other direct steps to exploit the "fears of the African section of the population". Notable, British ecclesiastical and political figures were invited to British Guiana to meet the leaders of the People's Progressive Party and try to persuade the "moderate" elements to split off from the others. This was necessary because the Commission had concluded that:

"We are, therefore, driven to the conclusion that so long as the P.P.P. retains its present leadership and policies there is no way in which any real measure of responsible government can be restored without the certainty that the country will again be subjected to constitutional crisis."

This was another way of saying that the People's Progressive Party could not be expected to govern British Guiana in the interests of the "European class".

Among the many who visited British Guiana to try and split the Party into two or more parts were West Indian leaders including some who have since passed into the limbo of forgotten men.

Also, a leading expatriate firm employed in a high executive office a man who, with his wife, had had considerable experience in the British Secret Service. Eventually, as we all know, the split was accomplished and the basis laid for the present Sandys' plan.

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After the split in the People's Progressive Party, the British held new elections under an altered Constitution and on the basis of constituencies which were rigged to ensure defeat of the People's Progressive Party. Indeed, when Dr. Jagan protested to the Chief Secretary of British Guiana about this, he was told that the constituencies were, in fact, constituted as they were in order to secure the defeat of the People's Progressive Party.

But again, the British mis-calculated and the People's Progressive Party won the election. So jerrymandered were the constituencies that Dr. Jagan polled more votes in his constituency than all the five opposition elected members put together. For the second time in a row, the electorate had returned to office a party that would not place the interests of the "European" class above the interests of Guiana and its people.

After the elections in 1957, the Legislature passed a motion seeking the grant of independence to the people of British Guiana. The British insisted that before any such request would be considered, a Constitution Committee consisting of the members of the Legislature should prepare a report. It was during the deliberations of this Constitution Committee that Anthony Tasker, now local head of the expatriate firm of Bookers, proposed a system of Proportional Representation. In the end, independence was not granted but a system of "internal self-government" was agreed on condition that new elections were held with the constituencies arranged on a new basis.

On the occasion of the 1961 elections, three parties contested the elections and the British confidently expected that no single party would win a majority on the basis of the specially "jerrymandered" constituencies arranged by a British boundary Commissioner. Again, however, the People's Progressive Party defeated the hopes of the British and won office. Again the hope of a "coalition" of "all interests" to preserve the British economic and political power was not realised since the pro-Guianese People's Progressive Party continued in office denying the British the right to govern British Guiana "over a round of golf or a whisky and soda" as Professor Arthur Lewis puts it.

Having failed three times to get the kind of Legislature and Executive it needed to protect its interests, the British Government passed to more direct attempts to defeat the will of the people. In 1962 and 1963, the Secret Services of the British and American Governments, as Drew Pearson the American columnist recently revealed, organised strikes and riots designed to secure the overthrow of the elected Government of British Guiana. In 1963, particularly, a blockade of our ports was put into effect and it was only after that blockade was broken by the importation of Cuban supplies that the Anglo-American plot failed.

In 1963 also, we witnessed organised attacks by hooligans on the lives and property of Indians in Georgetown and Indians and Africans in the rural areas, with the Police standing by in seeming impotence while 11 persons were killed and 150 injured. While this was at its height, the Colonial Secretary came to British Guiana and immediately the Police were able to bring the situation under control.

This is the background to Mr. Sandys' statement about racialism quoted at the commencement of this booklet and it is the excuse for the notorious Sandys' Plan which introduced the Proportional Representation requested by Mr. Anthony Tasker in 1958.

But the hypocrisy of the Sandys' statement on racialism is exposed by the words and deeds of Mr. Sandys in other ways.

At the 1963 Conference Mr. Sandys had stated:

"In the first place, the Constitution must provide the strongest safeguards to protect minorities, to preserve basic human rights, to ensure the impartiality of the Police, and to insulate the Judiciary and the Public Service from party political influence. The Constitutions of a number of new Commonwealth countries contain provisions designed to achieve these objectives, and, with necessary adaptations, I propose to apply them to British Guiana. However, in view of the racial character problem, I consider that there should be some special provisions to penalise those who seek to provide antagonism between the races."

Three amendments to the British Guiana Constitution have been placed before the British Parliament by Mr. Sandys since these words were spoken. Not one of those amendments includes "special provisions to penalise those who seek to promote antagonism between the races".

The amendments proposed by the British Government to the British Parliament provide only for creating conditions for the holding of elections under a new system of registration and Proportional Representation which will ensure that the expectation of the Waddington Commission is realised and, in the words of Mr. Duncan Sandys in 1963, there is created "a coalition Government of parties".

In the light of the historical record, the BRITISH stand exposed as the Racialists in British Guiana. Let us never forget that Rudyard Kipling, the master advocate of Colonialism described those people other than British as "the lesser breeds without the law".