

The Racialists of Guiana

On 31 October 1963, the Secretary of State for Commonwealth and Colonial Affairs Duncan Sandys, 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 19 March 1927, Mr. H. Snell, 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 Africans, Hindus 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 to 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 will 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, RV Evan-Wong, N Cannon.

It will be seen from the composition of the Legislature that control was in the hands of local people of divers 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 realize 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 Guianese, 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 developments that were 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 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 realize 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 PPP 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; today 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 PPP 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.

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.

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Notes:

In this article, written in April 1964, Dr Jagan examined the racial problematic in Guyana and argued that the root cause had to do with the machinations and intrigues of the plantocracy in active collaboration with the Colonial Office to "divide and rule."

Dr Jagan was passionate on the question of racial unity. He firmly believed that for Guyana to move forward, there must be unity at the political and ethnic levels. He took issue with the Robertson Commission in trying to reduce Guyana's problem to one of ethnic determinism.

The installation of the PNC/UF regime in 1964 did little to bridge the ethnic divide due mainly to a combination of force and fraud intended to deny the PPP political office.

Supporters of the PPP were effectively disenfranchised through massively rigged elections, which, coupled with the PNC's discriminatory employment practices, did very little to improve ethnic relations in Guyana.

In 1992, under pressure from the United States and other donor institutions, the PNC was forced to agree to the holding of free and fair elections that saw the PPP (along with its Civic component) returned to office, and winning successive general elections since then.