

BURNHAM PRECIPITATED SUSPENSION

by Observer

The struggle for national liberation and social emancipation has been long and bitter. Generally, progressives and liberal-minded persons have tended to blame the imperialists for all the sins of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

It is forgotten, however, that it is the nature of imperialism to defend and maintain the status quo, the Old Order. When vested interests are threatened, the camouflage of the civilising mission -- White Man's Burden -- and golden glove is cast aside and the naked fist is used. Quiet diplomacy with various stratagems of divide-and-rule is supplanted by force -- gunboat diplomacy, suppression and rejection of demands for national liberation.

When Guyanese journalist, Carl Blackman, noted that "if there had been no suspension [of the Constitution in 1953], we would be a happier, prosperous nation today", he was referring to the role of our colonial masters. What he studiously forgot were the national and regional situation and the roles of West Indian and Guyanese leaders.

REGIONAL SUPPORT

It could be argued that British troops would not have been sent had the Colonial Office and Whitehall not sensed that a favourable situation existed to justify their gunboat action.

Oliver Lyttleton, then Secretary of State for the Colonies, in moving in the House of Commons on 22 October 1953 "that this House approve the action of Her Majesty's Government in British Guiana", invoked the support of Caribbean leaders.

He read telegrams from friends of the Labour Party -- Grantley Adams, Alexander Bustamante, Norman Manley and Rita Hinden. The Caribbean leaders' support for armed intervention was understandable. They had been co-opted in the Cold War: Adams had defended colonialism at a UN meeting in Paris in 1948, for which he had been attacked by the Nigerians; Manley's PNP expelled in 1951 the "4 H's" -- leftist Richard Hart, the two Hill brothers and Arthur Henry; soon after, the militant Caribbean Labour Congress (CLC) was scuttled and its revolutionary Montego Bay resolution of 1945 for an independent West Indies Federation was abandoned.

Lyttleton cited Rita Hinden of the British Fabian Bureau, which had ideologically nurtured Caribbean leaders like Grantley Adams. She was a member of the Waddington Constitution Commission (1951 - 52) and had been criticised for not advocating self-government for Guyana.

CONSPIRATORS

Lyttleton also read out telegrams which he had received from two organisations at home -- the League of Coloured People and the British Guiana Village Chairmen's Conference.

The Village Chairmen's Conference was a reactionary body elected on the basis of a limited suffrage, a body opposed to the introduction of universal adult suffrage, and to the abolition of fully nominated country districts and of nominated seats in partially elected village councils!

Unlike its British counterpart, the League of Coloured People (LCP) in British Guiana, like the British Guiana East Indian Association, was a racist organisation. Two of its principal leaders, W.O.R. Kendall and Dr J.A. Nicholson, had voted against a motion for adult suffrage in the Legislative Council in 1948.

The LCP was the main force behind the opposition National Democratic Party (NDP). John Carter was General Secretary of both the LCP and NDP (the latter won only 4, compared with PPP's 18, out of the 24 seats in the 1953 elections).

NDP's John Carter, Lionel Luckhoo, John Fernandes and Rudy Kendall went to London to give support to the British Government. Its leadership was paid handsomely with a dominating position in the British-imposed Interim Government (1954 - 57).

LEADER OR NOTHING

Ironically, the biggest support for the British gunboat action was L.F.S. Burnham. British ruling circles were confident that, although Burnham accompanied Cheddi Jagan to London to protest, they could count on him because of his weaknesses and opportunism.

The British were aware of Burnham's "leader or nothing" demand during "crisis week" - the week after the 1993 elections, when the PPP General Council had met to select ministers. Refusing to agree to the six chosen ministers, of which he was to be the Minister of Education, he said that the leadership question must be settled first. It was pointed that this question had been specifically settled at the Third Party Congress held at the Auditorium in Georgetown in March 1953.

At the congress that previous March, one of Burnham's lieutenants, A.P. Alleyne, who became Speaker of the House of Assembly in January 1963, had introduced a motion that the Leader of the party should not be elected at the Congress, but by the General Council after the general election. This was done because of Burnham's plans for capturing a majority of the members of the General Council. He had carefully stage-managed the Congress. In 1952, he proposed that the Third Party Congress should be a members' rather than a delegates' Congress to be held in Georgetown. Unsuspecting, Jagan and others agreed to his proposal. But at the Congress it became quite clear why he had favoured Georgetown as the venue; he had felt that with a members' Congress in Georgetown, he would have been able to

pack the auditorium with his supporters and thus realise his personal ambitions.

But he suffered a rude shock at the Congress in spite of his careful arrangements. In the debate on the motion, Sydney King (now Eusi Kwayana) made an impassioned speech. "This is a motion of no confidence in our leader; why such a motion of no confidence in our leader; why such a motion at this time?" he argued. The rank and file, most of whom were from Georgetown, saw Sydney King's point and threw out the motion.

MANOEUVRES

On Thursday of "Crisis Week" Burnham used tactics and methods which were to be repeated many times later.

One of Burnham's lieutenants summoned a mass meeting at the auditorium, a meeting not sanctioned by the party. His objective was to rouse the rank and file to force Jagan to surrender to his ultimatum. But his plans went awry. Rudy Luck attended the meeting and, like Sydney King at the Annual Congress, pointed out to the rank and file the real reasons for the crisis. After the facts had been clearly stated, the meeting broke up in disorder. It was only then that Burnham dropped his ultimatum and agreed to discuss the selection of ministers.

But he was not to give in so easily; he demanded his pound of flesh. He pushed forward the candidature of Jai Narine Singh and Dr Hanoman-Singh whose names had not been included in the

list of six -- Dr J.P. Lachhmansingh, Sydney King, Janet Jagan, Ashton Chase, Burnham and Jagan. He also wanted a change of ~~the~~ ^{the} proposed nominees, George Robertson and W.H. Thomas, to the State Council.

"Crisis Week" ended with a compromise in the naming of ministers. Janet Jagan was dropped and named deputy speaker; Jai Narine Singh was included among the six.

OPPORTUNISM

The Robertson Commission (1954) which white-washed the suspension of the Constitution stated that "so long as the PPP maintained its leadership and policies, there would be a period of marking time".

This was the cue to L.F.S. Burnham, who was not harassed, detained, jailed or restricted like other PPP leaders, to take over the PPP. His unconstitutional manoeuvre to accomplish that in 1955 led to the split of the national movement.

Had Burnham not created "crisis week", it is doubtful that there would have been a suspension. Had he not split the PPP, Guyana would have ^{been} spared the strikes and strife of the 1962-64 period. Independence would not have been delayed until 1966 and Guyana would have been spared the tragedy of 28 years of authoritarian rule and socio-economic debacle.