The Boycott of Dr. Jagan

LAST Friday, the National Executive of the Labour Party, after having interviewed Dr. Jagan and Mr. Burnham, published a statement condemning them in language even more arrogant than Mr. Griffiths had used in the House of Commons, and advised its members to organis or speak on Dr. Jagan's platform. Nothing illustrates better the change in the climate of Labour Party opinion towards Colonial nationalism.

The suspension of the Guianese Constitution is a fait accompli. Let us concede, for the sake of argument, to both Mr. Griffiths and Mr. Lyttelton, that Dr. Jagan's Government missed its opportunities and failed in its trust. Consider, nevertheless, what has happened since. Dr. Jagan, having proved to his own satisfaction that Mr. Lyttelton's brand of freedom was, as he had suspected, strictly limited in its application, paid British democracy a compliment—not the least marked for being perhaps incorrectly received by some to-day in England. In order to lay his case before the people of Britain, confident that he would be able to find among ordinary citizens the sympathy he could not win from the Government. By the time he arrived, the Communist Party and its "front" organisations were in full cry to capture him for Communist platforms. For Communists hold that it helps their cause to appear as the champions of oppressed peoples. At the same time, a group of enterprising Socialists (prominent among them were Mr. Fenner Brockway and Miss Jennie Lee) organised a welcome for Dr. Jagan inside the Labour Party, and sought to offer him the freedom of Labour platforms.

Dr. Jagan and his fellow ex-Minister, Mr. Burnham, responded to this opportunity: they shrugged off the Communists and indicated that they preferred to work through the Labour Party. This decision, bitterly resented by the British Communist Party and its friends in the Caribbean Labour Congress, was equally bitterly resented, presumably for different reasons, in Transport House. Dr. Jagan had himself, naturally and properly, asked to have the opportunity of putting his case to the Commonwealth Sub-committee of Labour's National Executive. He was received last week at a specially convened meeting, at which representatives of the General Council of the T.U.C. were also present. Reports of this meeting suggest that it resembled the proceedings of a criminal court rather than a conversation between fellow Socialists. Sir Vincent Tewson and Sir William Lawther, already constitutionally involved in the jurisdictional battle in Guiana between the Manpower Citizens' Association (which has long been affiliated to the T.U.C.) and the newer P.P.P.-backed Industrial Workers' Union, are said to have cross-examined the ex-Ministers from prepared briefs with a degree of a priori hostility which would not have been out of place in a trial for murder. Last Friday's statement came as a result of this meeting. In set terms, it accused the P.P.P. leaders of "pursuing a Communist policy" and advised local parties not to provide a platform for P.P.P. speakers.

Is Dr. Jagan, then, a Communist? Many intelligent Socialists who have met him on this visit believe that he is a puzzled young man of deep socialist and nationalist convictions, suspicious of both Britain and the British Labour Party, which has never extended to him the hand of comradship, and desperately anxious for support and guidance in what must seem to him a lonely, as well as an uphill struggle. The Communists have offered that guidance, and Jagan has responded to their overtures. It seems to us improbable that he is a Communist in any more significant sense than that. But in any case, the question is irrelevant. It is not as a Communist but as a nationalist that Dr. Jagan is the freely elected champion of the people of Guiana. And if, when he seeks to put their case in Britain, he is insulted and rebuffed, the insult will be held to be directed, not against a small cell of Communists which may or may not exist either within the P.P.P., but against the people of Guiana and their struggle against exploitation.

Britain has already failed British Guiana in most of the ways that are possible. It is British capital which has grown rich on the miserable conditions of the Guianese workers; and this reproach is no less real to the Guianese than to the few belated reforms of recent years. It is successive British Governments which, by denying the people of Guiana the power which they would have to prevent, Dr. Jagan and his colleagues from getting to their views. What it did was to dissociate the Labour Party from the Government's decision to suspend the Constitution. They had, in some respects a greater responsibility than certain sections of the Labour movement has insulted not so much Dr. Jagan, who, if he is indeed a Communist, will be more well satisfied with what has happened, but the masses who, for better or worse, looked upon him as their leader. The Communists are never tired of claiming that the Labour Party stands almost indistinguishably from the Tories, for imperialist exploitation. On Labour's post-war record that charge is false. All those who helped to impose last week's ban have done something to make it seem more true. It is they who have directed Guianese nationalists into the Communist camp, and they must not be surprised if their advice is taken in heart in other parts of the Colonial world.