

Who remembers Cheddi Jagan? Britain's forgotten coup in South America

In October 1953 the UK overthrew a democratically-elected government in British Guiana. UK officials knew deposed leader Cheddi Jagan was benefiting the impoverished local population but acted to protect its business interests, declassified files show.

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Dr Cheddi Jagan with his wife Janet in 1953. (Photo: Keystone / Getty)

In October 1953, Britain sent three warships and 700 troops to its colony of British Guiana, suspended the constitution and overthrew the democratically elected government 133 days after it had assumed office.

In April 1953, the People's Progressive Party (PPP) under Cheddi Jagan had won 18 out of the 24 seats in British Guiana's first elections under universal suffrage.

But Jagan's programme of social and economic reforms was the wrong type of democracy for Winston Churchill's government – since it threatened control over the territory's resources by UK and allied business interests.

Jagan called for redistributing resources towards the welfare needs of the workforce, increasing minimum wage levels and health services and strengthening the position of the trade unions.

He also urged curbing the dominance of the sugar multinational, Bookers, and exposed the sugar companies' access to public funds which bolstered the profits the industry generated and sent abroad.

On 9 October, the British governor, Sir Alfred Savage, announced the constitution was being suspended and that elected ministers were being removed from office.

The new Queen, Elizabeth, signed the order suspending the constitution and overthrowing the government.

Sugar interests

British Guiana's key resources were sugar and, to a lesser extent, bauxite. Over a quarter of the country's working population of 100,000 people were employed in the sugar industry and about 20 per cent lived on the sugar estates.

Almost all the sugar cane was grown on 17 large plantations owned by private companies, principally Bookers which had a controlling interest in most of the plantations.

The colony's bauxite exports accounted for one fifth of world production and 90 per cent of British Guiana's output was in the hands of a single company — the Demerara Bauxite Company, a subsidiary of the Aluminium Company of Canada (ALC).

Together, sugar and bauxite accounted for 90 per cent of British Guiana's exports: the territory was therefore effectively owned and controlled by Britain in alliance with two transnational companies.

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British Guiana's colonial function was to provide cheap raw materials to Britain and other rich nations. Its bauxite provided 85 per cent of the supply for the Canadian aluminium industry, contributing to the large profits (Canadian \$29m in 1951) made by ALC.

In turn, Britain secured most of its aluminium supplies from Canada. ALC's 1952 company report noted that many of its aluminium shipments went to the “defence needs” of Britain and the US.

A British government report of 1953 observed with some understatement that: “The mining companies (mostly Demerara Bauxite Co.) have made profits of approximately £1m a year for the past four years and have distributed £600,000 a year in dividends... There may well, therefore, be scope for some increase in mining taxation in the territory”.

The Colonial Office later noted that the sugar companies were open to criticism for being “‘big business’, very efficiently run, but run for the sole benefit of their owners or shareholders”.

‘Squalor and poverty’

The less fortunate in this state of affairs were the people of British Guiana who endured “squalor and poverty” in a society with a “long glaring contrast between rich and poor”, the *Manchester Guardian* commented in 1953.

An earlier official report described the population as living “closely crowded in ranges on the verge of collapse, lacking every amenity and frequently almost surrounded by stagnant water”. These ranges were built by the sugar estates to house the indentured labourers.

The governor noted: "The sugar estates are to a considerable extent the crux of the situation ... It is there that the extremist is so well supported. It is so easy for him to point to the dreadful housing and social conditions which exist (and to ignore the improvements) and compare them with the comfortable quarters and the neat compounds and the recreational facilities of the staff who are predominantly European."

Savage added: "It is also easy for him to allege unfair profits being transferred to absentee landlords and to blame, as is done, the British government for the conditions which exist."

'Great value to the territory'

It was mainly because Jagan's PPP sought to improve the "dreadful housing and social conditions" that it was elected to office.

Britain's Commonwealth Relations Office, a government department, stated that the PPP "was in fact elected to power on a mildly socialist programme, the implementation of which would have been in general of great value to the territory".

Colonial secretary Oliver Lyttelton – a key figure in later ordering the overthrow of the government – noted a week after the PPP's electoral triumph that its programme was "no more extreme" than that of Britain's Labour Party.

"It contains none of the usual communist aims and it advocates industrial development through the encouragement of foreign capital", he said.

But Jagan's plans went beyond the acceptable. In August 1953, PPP ministers called for a strike by the sugar workers who were fighting for the sugar producers to recognise their union.

By 10 September, the Governor was noting that the sugar industry was "at complete standstill".

Bookers stated the strike meant "a loss of profits" and that "the present situation can only be dealt with effectively by the Colonial Office". Indeed, "unless something drastic is done, Bookers will cease to exist as a large firm in 5 years".

Although the sugar strike effectively ended, it left its mark and it was clear the PPP retained the wrong priorities. All in all, the party had "overstepped the limits of what we regard as decent government", one British MP, Nigel Nicolson, later explained.

'Confidence of the business community'

British concerns were clear. Lyttelton noted on the day intervention was decided upon that the PPP had "completely destroyed the confidence of the business community and all moderate opinion".

Later, he said Britain "took action before further deterioration showed itself in the action of the business community".

"The same party would have been elected again"

He also observed that "a number of American or overseas firms ... were already abandoning their projects in British Guiana" and that they "were very apprehensive about the dangerous political climate".

The danger was that conditions were being created that were “inimical to investment either domestic or overseas”. Thus the PPP were “threatening the order of the Colony” and undermining “its present economic stability”.

In December the colonial secretary again warned of the threat of democracy, noting that if Britain had permitted new elections in British Guiana instead of suspending the constitution “the same party would have been elected again”.

‘Preparation of public opinion’

Since overthrowing nationalist leaders who advocate improving the social conditions of the poor is not good public relations, a suitable pretext was necessary. So when the intervention was announced to the Guianan people on 9 October, governor Savage claimed that Britain was acting “to prevent Communist subversion of the government”.

The elected ministers and the PPP were: “completely under the control of a communist clique...Their objective was to turn British Guiana into a totalitarian state subordinate to Moscow and a dangerous platform for extending communist influence in the Western hemisphere”.

Lyttelton preposterously told the House of Commons that it was all “part of the deadly design to turn British Guiana into a totalitarian state dominated by communist ideas”. Britain was “faced with part of the international communist conspiracy”.

The declassified files give this game away. Britain’s delegation to the United Nations cabled Lyttelton a week before the overthrow and stated: “If our action can be presented as firm step [sic] taken to prevent attempt by communist elements to sabotage new and progressive constitution, it will be welcomed by American public and accepted by most United Nations opinion”.

It added: “If on the other hand it is allowed to appear as just another attempt by Britain to stifle a popular nationalist movement...effect can only be bad...To secure desired result some preparation of public opinion seems to be essential” [sic].

Firm action’

The US supported the UK attack on British Guiana, saying it was “gratified to note that the British government is taking firm action to meet the situation”.

The British embassy in Washington declared that the State Department “have worked in very well with us over this crisis ... if the Jagans wished to come to this country in order to publicise their case they would not be allowed visas. This goes for any of their buddies too”.

The opposition Labour Party also supported the intervention. James Griffiths, a former colonial secretary, agreed in the House of Commons with the governor’s statement that the PPP aimed “to turn British Guiana into a totalitarian state subordinate to Moscow”.

Labour leader Clement Attlee also agreed, only questioning whether the government had exhausted all the options before acting; thus Labour accepted Britain’s right to overthrow democracy, only disputing its timing.

Hard labour

The elected government was replaced by one nominated by the governor, which contained many members who had been defeated candidates in the April elections.

Cheddi and his wife Janet, who had co-founded the PPP, were sentenced to six months hard labour for violating restriction orders. Other senior PPP figures were detained without trial for three month periods.

In a British parliamentary debate two weeks after the overthrow of democracy, Lyttelton observed that Britain would now foster “some body representing Guianese opinion upon whose advice the Governor may rely” but “upon whose advice he will not be bound to act in the interim period”.

Eighteen months after the intervention the Governor commented that he needed “one company of regular troops until representative government has been successfully restored”.

The presence of British troops would provide “a short term insurance against disorders” since “while political activity is at an enforced standstill it would be rash to dispense with all troops”.

This is an edited extract from Mark Curtis’ book [*Web of Deceit: Britain’s Real Role in the World*](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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