

Churchill's troops couldn't stop the 'wind of change' in Guyana

Overthrowing the People's Progressive party could only delay independence, says Cary Fraser

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Your obituary of Janet Jagan covered the removal of her People's Progressive party from office in 1953 ([Janet Jagan: American-born first female president of Guyana who stuck to her Marxist views, 30 March](#)). At the time, as you report, she was a member of the pre-independence legislative assembly; and in that year's elections the PPP "won half of the vote and most of the seats".

You then add that the party's "youthful ministers and members struck revolutionary poses and passed reformist legislation. This proved too much for the British governor and the Colonial Office; the government was removed from office and the constitution suspended a few months later." You neglected to mention, though, that this was accomplished by way of British troops sent to the colony.

The British intervention took place because the colonial governor and the PPP were unable to agree on the need to improve the conditions and rights of the working population. In the 1930s, riots in the British West Indian colonies had led to the Moyne Commission investigation. Its report, published in 1945, called for major economic and political reform.

Walter Citrine, a trade unionist member of the commission, said: "I felt I could never again hear talk of our 'trusteeship' over the coloured peoples without a feeling of shame at the callous way in which we had neglected them. I was burning with indignation at the neglect I saw everywhere, and the stories of poverty I heard, and the wretched houses which I couldn't miss seeing, that it made me depressed and sick at times."

After 1945, there was little evidence of a sense of shame among the sugar companies who dominated the colonies, or among the colonial administration in British Guiana. In fact, a 1948 demonstration for better working conditions led to the shooting of five sugar workers.

When the PPP came to office in 1953 it had little reason to believe the British government was prepared to force the sugar companies to reform, and undertook to pursue legislation that would move government policy in that direction. The party leadership sped up the process of constitutional devolution by passing laws opposed by the governor, the Sugar Producers Association, and their allies. The PPP hoped it would be able to persuade Britain to recognise that the "business as usual" approach of the colony's administration had to be abandoned. Instead, the Churchill government sent troops and suspended the constitution while claiming PPP involvement in a "communist plot".

A more measured assessment came in the 1954 report of the British Guiana Constitutional Commission, which investigated the 1953 events and concluded: "Her Majesty's Government's Colonial Policy failed in British Guiana ... because the party which received the support of the majority of the electorate was unwilling to accept and work anything short of self-government."

As in Malaya and Kenya, British military intervention in British Guiana could not stop the "wind of change" sweeping the colonial world, and in 1966 [Guyana](#) finally gained its independence.

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