



THE SINGULAR DECOLONISATION OF BRITISH GUIANA

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While the vast majority of Caribbean islands were colonised by Britain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Dutch colonies of Demerara-Essequibo and Berbice officially became part of the British Empire as a single territory called British Guiana, in 1831.¹ Prior to this date, Demerara, Essequibo and Berbice belonged to the Dutch West India Company, yet British planters had gained significant demographic weight in the late eighteenth century and strongly opposed the joint-stock company over issues of taxation and political representation. This led the Dutch government to assume direct control of Demerara and Essequibo, which were consolidated into a single colony. The outbreak of the Napoleonic Wars, however, a couple of years later, resulted in alternating periods of domination by the French, the British and the Dutch, until permanent British control was made official at the Convention of London, in 1814.

British Guiana, which was located on the northeastern coast of the Southern American continent, became the only territory of the British Caribbean on the American mainland and the largest by land area. It therefore attracted many former slaves from the neighbouring overpopulated islands after Emancipation. Its population was further increased by the arrival of a significant number of indentured immigrants from Europe, Africa and Asia until the early twentieth century. According to Canadian historian Juanita de Barros, slightly over half of the immigrants who landed in the British West Indies between 1834 and 1918 settled in British Guiana [DE BARROS : 22]. This translated into a unique demographic make-up characterised by great ethnic diversity and, by 1911, the demographic domination of the population of Indian descent. The latter accounted for 43% of the total

¹ British domination was officially acknowledged in 1814 but the unification of Demerara, Essequibo and Berbice which gave birth to British Guiana occurred only in 1831.

population while there were 39% of Blacks, which was uncommon in the region [DE BARROS : 32].

Economic exploitation and political domination by the ruling planter class meant that most Guianese lived in dire social and economic conditions in the early twentieth century. The issues besetting the Guianese population worsened when global recession struck in the 1930s and labour disputes broke out on sugar plantations. British Guiana was no exception as a wave of labour unrest spread throughout the Caribbean. Trinidadian historian Eric Williams points out that this troubled period marked the beginning of trade union activism in the region and gave rise to political parties reflecting the nationalist spirit which developed in the late 1930s. [WILLIAMS : 474]

Colonial resolve to achieve greater political freedom was further strengthened by the support for self-determination solemnly expressed by American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his Four Freedoms speech of 6 January 1941 and in the subsequent Atlantic Charter jointly issued by Britain and the United States in August of the same year². In the aftermath of the Second World War, Britain was left with no other choice than to reconsider its relationships with its colonial possessions. Financially exhausted by the war, facing international opposition to colonialism and witnessing the emergence of Third World nationalisms worldwide, Britain set out to manage the process of decolonisation in a way that would ensure that it maintained privileged ties with its former colonies.

In the Caribbean, the path to independence was first conceived within the framework of a federation. But the failure of this experiment eventually led Britain to grant independence to its Caribbean colonies on a separate basis. This paper will examine the specific case of British Guiana and highlight the political stakes surrounding the decolonisation of this territory. The distinctive features of the Guianese experience within the Caribbean region will first appear in the analysis of British Guiana's stance on the Federation project. The gradual disintegration and reorganisation of the Guianese independence movement, which resulted in racial violence and political instability, will then be examined. This will lead to the exploration of the

² Cf. "Third, they respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live".

influential role played by the United States in the decolonisation of British Guiana.

While formal discussions about the creation of a political union of British Caribbean territories started in the late 1940s, the setting up of a Federation in the region had been contemplated on more than one occasion in the previous decades. American historian Sharon Sewell notes that in 1922, the Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies examined the possibility of consolidating Eastern Caribbean territories into a federation. About a decade later, in 1933, the Secretary of State for the Colonies suggested that Trinidad, the Leeward Islands and the Windward Islands should form a federation. In 1940, following its investigation into the disturbances which shook the Caribbean region a few years before, the West India Royal Commission, best known as the Moyne Commission, released a preliminary report recommending the creation of a federation to pave the way for independence [SEWELL : 2]. British officials believed that Caribbean territories were too small and thus too weak to compete on world markets and to make their voices heard individually on the international stage. Britain therefore stressed that the economic and political survival of British Caribbean territories depended on their ability to join forces and form a stronger political union.

This view eventually prevailed because it came to be seen by West Indian politicians as the only means to achieve independence. A meeting of West Indian leaders was thus convened in Montego Bay (Jamaica) in 1947, on the proposal of the Colonial Office. At the conclusion of this nine-day conference, an official resolution calling for the establishment of a loose federation was voted by all the delegations except the Guianese one.³ Yet, the Standing Closer Association Committee, which was set up to draft a federal constitution and work out organisational issues, included two Guianese representatives. According to the conclusions of the Rance Report the committee presented in October 1949 Britain was to retain significant control over the executive branch of the federation [ETZIONI : 144]. Political scientist Gordon K. Lewis therefore concluded that the new political arrangements only provided for “an enlarged Crown Colony type of

³ The Guianese delegation comprised three delegates, namely Sir Eustace Woolford, Frederick J. Seaford and Dr J.B. Singh, and two advisers called F.W. Holder and E.F. McDavid.

government” [LEWIS : 375]. The provisions of the Rance Report were rejected by the legislatures of British Guiana and British Honduras, which marked their refusal to join the Federation.⁴ As a consequence, when the Federation of the West Indies officially came into being on January 3rd, 1958, it only comprised the ten British West Indian islands stretching from Jamaica to Trinidad and Tobago.

Various arguments were raised to justify the Guianese stance. On the one hand, many opponents to British Guiana’s membership in the Federation rather favoured a continental destiny for this mainland territory. On the other hand, some Guianese expressed concern about the risk of massive immigration from smaller territories, which would put a great strain on British Guiana’s resources. Last but not least, it is widely acknowledged that the reluctance of the East Indian population to become a minority group within a predominantly Afro-Caribbean political entity strongly accounted for British Guiana’s refusal to join the Federation of the West Indies.

Consequently, the talks relative to the decolonisation of British Guiana took place exclusively between the Colonial Office and the two most prominent Guianese nationalist leaders, Cheddi Jagan and Linden Forbes Burnham. However, as the years went by, the unity first displayed by these Guianese leaders fell apart and the negotiations toward independence were most strongly impacted by their personal rivalry, ideological positioning and electoral strategies.

1953 was a watershed year on the road to self-government for British Guiana, which had been a Crown colony since 1928. Following the extension of the franchise to all adults over twenty-one years old – a measure advocated by the 1951 Waddington Commission –, the People’s Progressive Party (PPP) enjoyed a landslide victory in the general elections, only three years after its creation. The People’s Progressive Party was the first Guianese nationalist party. Its multiethnic membership and leadership in an ethnically divided society was a feat, according to British sociologist Steve Garner [GARNER : 96-97]. This class-based coalition headed by union leaders set out to implement social reforms. One of its first momentous decisions was to introduce a Labour Relations Bill aiming at granting workers the freedom to choose their union. This measure was interpreted as a clear attack against

⁴ British Guiana was represented by C.V. Wright and T. Lee.

the interests of Booker Brothers, McConnell & Co. Ltd, the British firm which dominated the sugar industry in British Guiana. The following day, on October 9th 1953, the British government suspended the Constitution, appointed a legislature and a cabinet, and PPP leaders were put under arrest for possessing allegedly subversive works. At that point, British troops had already landed in British Guiana to prevent a Marxist coup.

This was a hard blow on the Guianese nationalist movement which further suffered from the divisive conclusions of the Robertson Commission. This investigation committee identified two ideological stances within the PPP. The one embodied by Cheddi Jagan was deemed Marxist whereas Forbes Burnham was said to head the Social-Democratic wing of the party. Political opportunism led Burnham and his followers to break with the PPP in 1955 and boast a moderate line. A year later, a second split occurred within the PPP and resulted in the ethnic homogenisation of the party, whose membership became predominantly East Indian.

Despite the defections and the creation of new opposition parties, such as Burnham's People's National Congress in 1957, the PPP managed to win the 1957 and 1961 elections. However a series of violent strikes and demonstrations organised by the opposition parties in 1962 and 1963 impeded the action of the PPP government. As a consequence, the PPP's ability to maintain law and order was called into question at the Conference on Independence that took place in London in November 1963. In addition, one of the main issues dealt with at this conference, the reform of the voting system, clearly revealed that the British government had decided to remove the PPP from power. As a matter of fact, the decision made by Colonial State Secretary Duncan Sandys to refrain from lowering the voting age while introducing proportional representation to replace the first-past-the-post system meant that he had ignored Cheddi Jagan's request but complied with the demands of his political opponent.

1964 was therefore a decisive election year. The development of ethnic voting patterns, which had started in the late 1950s, degenerated into ethnic violence in the early 1960s and reached a climax in 1964. At that time, the Guianese population comprised about 48% of East Indians and about 33% of Blacks, the two main competing groups [RYAN : 2]. Over a hundred people were killed and thousands were injured due to ethnic strife that year [ESPOSITO : 53]. The Guianese population lived in a state of emergency for

more than six months and fear of ethnically motivated attacks further increased residential segregation. Once more, the PPP came out of the elections with the highest number of seats. But as expected, the new voting system led to the formation of a coalition government consisting of the PNC and United Force (UF), a conservative party led by businessman Peter d'Aguiar. Although this political alliance was clearly against nature, it was hailed by the British government, which readily set a date for independence at the Constitutional Conference organised in London in 1965.⁵ Independence within the British Commonwealth of Nations was eventually granted on May 26, 1966 and the country was renamed Guyana.

While Jamaica or Trinidad and Tobago had peacefully made the transition from colonial status to independent nationhood in the early 1960s, British Guiana's path to independence was fraught with tensions and violence, which led to protracted negotiations. The decision to delay independence was due in no small part to the intervention of the United States in the course of British decolonisation.

The new global power structure which emerged at the end of the Second World War led successive American administrations to balance their country's traditional anti-colonialism with Cold War imperatives. Indeed, the Truman Doctrine, formulated in 1947 and complemented by Eisenhower's Domino Theory in 1954, marked a clear shift in American foreign policy as containment of communism was given overriding importance. In that context, the United States gradually considered British Guiana as a Cold War battleground.

The threat represented by British Guiana was embodied by nationalist leader Cheddi Jagan and his American wife, Janet Jagan. At least, that was the view defended by the leaders of the two most prominent labour organisations in the United States – the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) –, as well as Kennedy's Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Several reasons account for this hostility against the Jagans. Their background, their rhetoric and foreign policy choices were all interpreted as telling evidence of their absolute allegiance to communism. First, Janet Jagan was under suspicion because she had been a member of the Young Communist League of Chicago. Secondly, both

⁵ This last conference before independence was boycotted by the PPP.

Cheddi and Janet Jagan travelled to countries of the Eastern Bloc such as Eastern Germany in 1951 and Cuba in 1960. Thirdly, instead of distancing himself from communism as prominent Caribbean left-wing nationalists such as Norman Manley and Grantley Adams did at the time, Cheddi Jagan plainly stated and reiterated his admiration for Cuban leader Fidel Castro. Not only did he praise the latter but his government also developed trade partnerships and educational exchange programmes with Cuba and Hungary. This stance became all the more unacceptable to the American government as the United States had been powerless in the face of a humiliating communist breakthrough in its hemisphere. The Cuban Revolution and the failed Bay of Pigs invasion were traumatic events that the United States was determined to prevent elsewhere at all costs.

As a consequence, in the late 1950s, the United States began to conduct covert operations in British Guiana to destabilise the PPP government. American historian Stephen Rabe stresses the active role played by the CIA during the civil unrest that followed the third electoral victory of the PPP [RABE : 91]. As a matter of fact, the tens of thousands of Guianese civil servants who went on strike in February 1962 benefited from the financial support of the CIA. In an article dealing with this strike, historians Robert Waters and Gordon Daniels also point out to the involvement of the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), an offshoot of the AFL-CIO which: “trained a higher percentage of Guianese unionists than from any other country or colony in the hemisphere [...]” [WATERS & DANIELS : 297]. In addition, the main opposition parties – the PNC and UF – received logistic help and strategic advice from the CIA in the run-up to the 1964 election as well as grants after their coalition government ousted the PPP from office [RABE : 10].

Although the British government was fearful of the precedent that a communist takeover in British Guiana might set, it strongly resented the interventionist strategy chosen by the United States. The political, social and economic chaos triggered by US interventionism compromised Britain’s plan to speed up the decolonisation process. It also ran counter to Britain’s desire to preserve its image by ensuring a peaceful transition to independence. Britain had considered granting independence to British Guiana in 1962, but the Kennedy administration dissuaded it from implementing its plan. After heated diplomatic exchanges between Kennedy’s and Macmillan’s governments, Anglo-American tensions over

British Guiana were eventually soothed. This mostly resulted from Britain's attachment to its "special relationship" with the United States, especially at a time when it was financially and militarily dependent on its American ally.

In British Guiana, the decolonisation process was shaped by national, regional and international considerations. First, it unfolded outside the framework favoured by Britain and initially chosen by most British Caribbean colonies. This probably explains why most studies dealing with British decolonisation in the Caribbean region hardly devote more than a couple of lines to the Guianese case. In this respect, the present study aims at offering a more inclusive view. It must also be noted that full analyses of the events which led to the independence of British Guiana tend to be carried out by Cold War scholars, from an American perspective. It is hoped that this article will be seen as an attempt to bring British and American studies to a point of confluence. Secondly, after a promising start, the nationalist movement disintegrated and turned British Guiana into a conflict-ridden country unprepared for self-government. Lack of compromise between the figureheads of Guianese nationalism, political instability, fear of a communist takeover contributed to the repeated postponing of independence. While the vast majority of studies draw attention to the fact that the decolonisation of British Guiana was hindered by blind anticommunism from the United States, Joshua D. Esposito stresses that Linden Forbes Burnham's charisma and diplomatic shrewdness, compared to Cheddi Jagan's lack of pragmatism, equally impacted on this process. As a matter of fact, Forbes Burnham was eventually chosen to lead his country to independence, even though he was not considered to be the ideal candidate. Four years after independence, the nightmare scenario so feared by Britain and the United States became a reality: Guyana was turned into a cooperative republic.

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