

THE BRITISH ROAD TO SELF GOVERNMENT

By Cheddi Jagan

Successive British Governments have pronounced that "it is the declared policy of Her Majesty's Government to lead the colonial peoples to self government as quickly as possible".

Enunciating this idea of "voluntary abdication" and "gift of freedom", the Governor of British Guiana in a recent address to the Legislative Council said: "The British, which in the ten or twelve years since the war has given peacefully, with continued friendship and mutual assistance, the full freedom of sovereign status to 467 million - I think that is about exactly the figure - and is now in West Africa and Malaya and the West Indies, to mention only three areas, pushing forward the last stages towards a worthwhile self-governing nationhood for many million more".

Voluntary Abdication

I do not intend here to explode this myth of "voluntary abdication". Suffice it to say that the millions of India were "given" this "gift" of freedom" only after the Naval Revolt and the mass demonstrations in the streets of Bombay, Calcutta and other principal cities, only after Sir Stafford Cripps in March 5, 1947 in the House of Commons argued for transfer of power on the grounds that to maintain British rule would have meant "a considerable reinforcement of troops" and that alternative was "obviously impossible" when the additional troops were not available, "when we had not the power to carry it out".

Transfer of power to India and Pakistan inevitably meant freedom for Burma and Ceylon. It also inevitably meant a clamour on the part of other colonial territories for similar rights.

This clamour has been met in two ways. In some colonies, there are "advances" in constitutions; in others, there is repression in one form or another - full scale war, emergency rule by restrictions and barbed wire, by deportations and detentions.

Apologists for British colonialism point to the "advances" in the constitutions of territories like the Gold Coast, Malaya, Jamaica, etc. as an indication of Britain's sincerity, of a new era of "progressive" colonialism and explain away rule by emergency on the ground that it is the fault of the "difficult" leaders who do not believe in sincerity, who resort to force, violence and terrorism, etc. to achieve their ends.

In this article, I will attempt to analyse constitutional "advance" in one Colony, British Guiana in the light of the self-rule declaration of the British Government. Prior to 1953, a crown-colony constitution provided for a single-chamber legislature of 14 elected and 10 nominated members and officials; and an advisory Executive Council of eight elected, nominated and official members selected by the Governor.

Experience has shown that the 1947-53 Constitutional set-up under which all power was in the hands of the Colonial Office and its appointee, the Governor, was a hopeless waste of time and money.

An "Advanced" Constitution

As a result, the Waddington Constitution (April 1953 to October 1953) provided for an elected majority in the lower House of the Legislature and the Executive Council. This apparent liberality was conceded with two checks in mind; one, direct; the other, indirect. Provision was made for reserve and veto powers of the Governor, and the delaying powers of the upper nominated House. Additionally it was anticipated that no one party would sufficiently develop by election time to capture a majority of the 24 seats, and thus select the six elected members (a majority) of the Executive Council. In fact, opinion on the eve of elections was a victory of not more than seven seats for the People's Progressive Party.

The P.P.P.'s victory of 18 out of 24 seats clearly upset the plans of the colonial constitution makers. Had the Party been permitted to remain in power beyond October 1953, it would have, in fulfillment of its electoral promises, exposed the constitutional weaknesses (checks) and the Governor. The latter, opposed as he was to ~~the~~ most of these measures, would have had to use his veto power. It was to forestall this exposure, and not as the British Government put it to prevent the establishment of a communist government that the troops moved in October 1953 and the P.P.P. Government was forced out.

Period of Marking Time

Towards the end of 1954 the Robertson Commission recommended an "indefinite period of marking time" to continue as long as the P.P.P. maintains "the present leadership and policies". What the Commission meant was that the marking time was to continue so long as the P.P.P. could win a majority at elections.

British Guiana is now to have a single-chamber Legislative Council of 12 elected, counter-balanced by 8 nominated and 4 official members and an Executive Council of 5 elected ministers counter-balanced by 4 officials and one nominated with the Governor choosing the elected ministers and sitting as Chairman, no doubt with a casting vote.

Why this farce? The Robertson Commission had observed that when the period of marking time came to an end, British Guiana should have the same legislature (House of Assembly and State Council) as under the Waddington Constitution, but a changed Executive Council (5 elected, 4 official and 1 nominated and not 6 elected, 3 official and 1 nominated as under the Waddington Constitution). In other words, the Robertson Commission wanted to give the elected a majority in the House of Assembly but keep control in the hands of the Governor, nominated and officials in the Executive Council.

Control in Legislature and Executive

The Colonial Secretary, Mr. Alan Lennox-Boyd and British Guiana's Governor Sir Patrick Renison have accepted the recommendations of the Robertson Commission for the Executive, but not for the Legislature. They want control on both the Legislative and Executive. This is a full turn from the Waddington Constitution.

They want control of the Legislature also because they now hold the view from a proper and careful assesment of the situation that despite the split of the Burnham faction, the P.P.P. still can win from 14 to 16 seats on the basis of 24 constituencies. A P.P.P. government with an elected majority in the House of Assembly under the Robertson Constitution but with no real voice in the Executive Council would have been a serious embarrassment to the imperialists.

One might then well ask - why don't the imperialists continue with the indefinite period of marking time? The answer to this is three fold.

As the Governor himself observed, the period of marking time is "frustrating". Some who were supporting the dictatorial rule are now protesting. Almost all sections of the Guianese people are fed up with the Puppet Legislature.

And then there is international pressure. The colonial liberation movements and anti-colonial world public opinion are growing day by day. Britain can hardly talk about free elections in Germany, when she denies them in British Guiana.

And last but not least, British imperialism wants British Guiana's participation in the West Indian Crown-Colony Federation. In his last Christmas broadcast, the Governor referred to the West Indian Federation and said it would be a disappointment, and even a shame "if British Guiana was still without any form of representative Government which could decide whether or not to join".

While the farce of the Lennex-Boyd - Renison constitution can by no stretch of the imagination set up a representative government, nevertheless the world will be made to believe that Guiana has an elected government. This will be accomplished very easily by manipulation under the "flexible" constitution. For the constitutional proposals provide for 12 elected, 4 officials and no more than 8 nominated members. Assuming that 8 anti-federation members are elected, the Governor can appoint only 1 nominated member. In such a case, the Legislature will be made up of 12 elected, 4 official and 1 nominated. Such a government will no doubt be termed a "representative government" capable of deciding the federation issue.

In the light of the above analysis, it should be abundantly clear that British colonial policy is motivated not by high principles, but is calculated to move rather by convenience and expediency. Put through the acid test of British Guiana, where the issue has not been complicated by blood-shed, violence and terrorism, British colonial policy stands condemned.