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The Twilight of Colonial Rule in the  
British West Indies:  
Nationalist Assertion vs Imperial  
Hubris in the 1930s<sup>1</sup>

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**Introduction**

*A social and economic study of the West Indies is . . . necessarily a study of poverty.*

W. M. Macmillan, *Warning from the West Indies*, 1936

The 1930s in the Caribbean saw the unfolding of a crisis of colonial authority and rule which paved the way for the rise of nationalist movements and the accession to independence by the majority of the British West Indian colonies over the ensuing decades. Macmillan's pithy comment captured the context in which the challenge to British colonial authority was mounted by disaffected populations in these territories. The West Indian colonies had become increasingly uncompetitive as sugar producers over the course of the nineteenth century and especially in the 1930s, as the Great Depression ushered in a new era of bankruptcy -- political, social, and, not least, economic -- for these "millstones" of empire. The growing evidence of West Indian misfortune evoked two major responses. First, the subjects of colonial rule who, having lived through the repeated failures of both London and the planter class to create a new society after the end of emancipation, determined that they should undertake the task of refashioning the political economy of the region to meet their needs as the majority of the population. The second response came from the imperial government which decided that it needed to redeem the betrayal of its *mission civilisatrice* by the West Indian planter class, their allies in London, and the colonial officials who had been given, or had acquired, wide discre-

tion in the exercise of their authority in the colonies over the century since the emancipation of the slaves. The 1930s was a period in which there emerged a competition between "nascent nationalist leadership" thrown up by the unrest and "the official mind" for the right to direct the future of the region – a contest that was to become a marked feature of the wider process of imperial disengagement that occurred between 1945 and 1964.<sup>2</sup>

### A Turbulent Decade – the West Indies in the 1930s

Starting in 1935, the British colonies in the Caribbean were shaken by disturbances arising from the economic downturn set in motion by the breakdown of the international monetary and trading systems in the 1920s and 1930s. The collapse of commodity prices – particularly that of sugar and other agricultural products from the British Caribbean – was compounded by the convergence of long- and short-term developments that did little to relieve the existing distress visited upon the West Indian colonies. In January 1935 riots occurred in St. Kitts, followed in February by a strike and protest march in Trinidad. In September of the same year, sugar workers in British Guiana went on strike, while a riot occurred in St. Vincent over increased taxes in October, and, in November, there was a strike in St. Lucia. In 1936 there was relative calm but in 1937 there were strikes and riots in Trinidad, Barbados, British Guiana and St. Lucia. In 1938 Jamaica was rocked by a series of strikes starting in January, which rose to a peak in May with disturbances resulting in 8 deaths, 200 other casualties and 700 people arrested. The cumulative effect of these disturbances was the revelation of the bankruptcy of the contemporary order in the region.<sup>3</sup>

The collapse of sugar prices – from a high of £23.10s in 1923 to £5 in 1934 – and the consequent decline in the profitability of the sugar industry, can be considered the catalyst triggering the unrest in these territories. However, the crisis in the sugar industry was symptomatic of the economic stagnation that afflicted these territories.<sup>4</sup> Despite efforts to improve levels of productivity and efficiency in the industry, British West Indian sugar production remained caught between the growth of cane sugar production by other producers such as Cuba and Mauritius, and the growth of a subsidized beet sugar industry in Europe. The emergence and expansion of these other sugar-producing centers reduced the share of the British West Indies in the international sugar

market. This increased competition forced the British West Indian sugar industry towards greater reliance upon preferences within the British imperial system to survive. Sugar production in Puerto Rico and Cuba had an especially adverse impact on the British West Indies after the Spanish-American War of 1898. The expansion of American imperial sway in the Caribbean had effectively closed the American market to British West Indian sugar exports.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, by the closing years of the nineteenth century, the British West Indies were locked into the British imperial system by their dependence upon the preferences granted by Britain and Canada. This dependence upon imperial preferences for sugar exports was made even more acute by the poor competitive position of other agricultural crops. Despite some diversification away from sugar, notably into bananas, nutmeg, cocoa, citrus, coffee, and arrowroot, these crops had been unable to compete with other producers within and outside of the British Empire.<sup>6</sup> Sugar, and its plantocracy, remained dominant despite the adversities confronted by the industry.

The condition of specialisation and dependence upon sugar in the British West Indies was reinforced by the lack of change in the domestic economy. The subsidies from the imperial exchequer and protected markets effectively provided a buffer for the sugar interests in the colonies and removed incentives for restructuring the economies of these territories. The margin of profitability offered by imperial preferences was sufficient to enable the sugar industry and the plantation system to survive. Despite the acquisition of land by free labourers, the emergence of a viable peasantry was constrained by the continued domination of the plantation economy in these territories.<sup>7</sup> The cultivation of alternative crops was largely undertaken by the peasant sector, though official support for the peasantry did not emerge until the late nineteenth century and remained fitful thereafter.<sup>8</sup> Competition from other producers and a lack of government support effectively constrained the development of these alternative crops. As a consequence, plantations remained the dominant unit of production throughout most of the British West Indies. Trade, fiscal policy, and, in effect, government policy, remained focused upon the interests of large-scale producers as these territories struggled to maintain their viability in the face of an increasingly adverse external environment.

Developments in the 1920s and 1930s did little to improve the position of the West Indian colonies. While the price of sugar rose during and

immediately after the 1914-1918 war, the price declined thereafter. In the late 1920s, the United Kingdom increased its subsidies for British West Indian sugar in order to provide the industry with breathing room to become more efficient. Throughout the 1930s worldwide sugar production exceeded demand. The major trading countries established the International Sugar Agreement (ISA) to limit production and exports, thereby stabilising the market. For the British West Indies, the agreement imposed limits upon the output of sugar for its duration. Given these limits, it was obvious that other avenues of economic activity were needed and that reform and reorganisation of these territories had become imperative. This situation was complicated by London's desire to reduce the burden that preferences for West Indian sugar placed upon the imperial exchequer.<sup>9</sup>

The adverse situation confronting the sugar industry was only one dimension of the predicament. The other parts of the agricultural sector in the British West Indies were in as serious, or even more precarious, condition. Cocoa producers in Grenada and Trinidad, despite the superior quality of their product, faced a serious threat from the emergence of lower-cost producers in Brazil and Africa. In 1939 the industry was reported to have been living on credit for several years hoping for an upswing in prices.<sup>10</sup> For bananas, which had become a major export for Jamaica, the Windward Islands, Dominica, and British Honduras, the spread of leaf spot disease had become a serious hindrance. The drop in production and the outbreak of the war triggered an increase in prices, but the long-term future of the crop was bleak.<sup>11</sup> In the case of the citrus industry, production in Jamaica was hampered by low prices and poor cultivation practices. In Dominica, hurricane damage and disease were serious hazards for citrus farmers. Both of these territories were also confronted by competition from Palestine and a decline in purchases by the United States which only worsened the problems facing the West Indian industry.

It was testimony to the state of the agricultural economy in the British West Indies in the 1930s that, apart from sugar, citrus was perceived to be the only agricultural export crop for which there was the possibility of expansion. However, even that possibility was considered uncertain.<sup>12</sup> Other agricultural crops suffering adversely in the 1930s included copra and rice. The coconut industry was suffering from a lack of investment. Rice as an export crop was important only to British Guiana, and the colony's markets were threatened by imports into the British West Indies

Specialisation  
①  
②  
③  
Cocoa  
Citrus  
Bananas  
Produce +  
Agriculture  
Specialisation  
Migration

from India and Burma.<sup>13</sup> As a consequence, according to the Royal Commission of 1938-39:

misfortune had overtaken the producers of most of the alternative agricultural commodities in which the West Indies had found relief from the sugar depression of the nineties . . . the position of the producers of such commodities as cocoa, coconuts, citrus, limes, bananas, coffee, rice and nutmegs has become so serious that in recent years there has been a decided movement back to sugar, though this has been lately checked by the operation of the International Sugar Agreement.<sup>14</sup>

The fortunes of the West Indian colonies remained hinged to the depressed international market for sugar.

A major cause of the precarious situation was the perennial problem of absentee ownership of land and capital. The absence of the owners of the largest productive enterprises from the territories provided them with scanty information on which to base decisions about the situation in the territories. As a consequence, the main focus of their involvement in the West Indies was to receive an adequate return on their investment and to ensure that imperial policy was designed to secure those returns. Sir J. Campbell, financial advisor in the Colonial Office, captured the essence of the problem when he declared that:

There are still many absentee landlords . . . there is still a marked "plantation" attitude; an absence of energy and efficiency; a tendency to cling strongly to the belief that the former "good times" are bound to recur; little effort to repay debt, or secure debt settlements more in consonance with the position as it stands today; - it strikes one as an early nineteenth century mentality and practice.<sup>15</sup>

In effect, within the Colonial Office there was the recognition that absenteeism, tinged with the nostalgia colouring the views of the planter class, was not to be dismissed in explaining the derelict state of the sugar industry and the colonies dependent upon its fortunes.

Closure  
of  
migration  
outlets

The crisis was further exacerbated by the closure in the 1920s and 1930s of traditional outlets for migration from these territories. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, migration had emerged as an alternative to the unemployment and underemployment that prevailed in these colonies.<sup>16</sup> Barbadian and Eastern Caribbean migration to Trinidad and British Guiana had been one outlet for the surplus population of the former territories. Jamaicans moved to work in Cuba and to establish settlements on the Central American mainland. The construction of the Panama Canal had also served as a magnet for migrant labour from Jamaica and Barbados, and many of these labourers had remained in Panama or in the Canal Zone. There was also migration to

the United States, particularly to New York, Boston and other major metropolitan areas.

In the wake of the economic dislocations of the 1930s, the traditional outlets for migration from the British West Indies began to close. Cuba and Panama began to introduce controls on migrant labour from the British West Indies, as did Trinidad. In addition, there was a net increase in returning migrants from the United States and other areas as the Depression set in.<sup>17</sup> The closure of these avenues of migration represented the loss of a safety valve for West Indians. This migration had been important to the British West Indian colonies in several ways. First, it reduced population pressure on the land in the labour-surplus territories. This outflow was undoubtedly a major factor in the maintenance of social stability in these colonies. It is arguable that migration of labour constituted both a cause and consequence of the survival of the plantation system in the British West Indies. It reduced pressure to reorient the economy and landholding systems to accommodate the growth in population. Second, the migration reduced unemployment and underemployment in these territories at a time when little attention was being paid to either economic expansion or diversification. By the 1930s improvements in health care across the region had led to a lowering of mortality rates and a resultant rise in the rate of natural increase of the population.<sup>18</sup> Population growth, combined with economic stagnation and increasing unemployment, inevitably increased the pressure in favour of migration. Third, migration offered employment and remuneration to workers from these colonies. Their remittances helped to maintain their families and communities in these territories.<sup>19</sup>

These economic and demographic pressures had clearly outstripped the capacities of the colonial administrations to confront the crisis that emerged in the 1930s. According to the Royal Commission, the principle along which colonial government was organised in the British colonies was based upon models drawn from the nineteenth century. It was rooted in the conception of government as the guardian of law and order.<sup>20</sup> The emergence of a modern democratic state in London had bypassed the West Indies. Prior to 1940, the fundamental responsibility of West Indian colonial governments was perceived to be the maintenance of a climate conducive to the well-being of investors in London and their agents in the colonies.<sup>21</sup> At both the territorial and metropolitan levels, the primary responsibility of colonial government was conceived as administration on behalf of the "responsible" classes who were largely

white.<sup>22</sup> Innovation in government, or activism on behalf of the non-white subjects who formed the majority in these territories, was not considered a virtue to be displayed by colonial service officials. Their future career opportunities were dependent upon the assessment of their performance by prominent colonists, or their associates, and other connections in London. The restrictive franchise, based upon property and income qualifications, consolidated the influence of white minority populations and prevented the emergence of legislatures representative of popular majorities. Democracy was inconceivable in a system committed to government on behalf of the "responsible" classes.

The crown colony system of government, rhetorically presented as a device to allow the Colonial Office to discharge impartially its responsibilities to the inhabitants of these colonies, actually functioned to perpetuate white minority rule.<sup>23</sup> The existence of representative assemblies in the Bahamas, Barbados, and Bermuda represented only a slight variation on the ethos of government by the "responsible" classes. This ethos was instrumental in perpetuating the rigidity of the West Indian political economy up to the middle of the twentieth century. Control over the territorial governments by white minorities in collaboration with the Colonial Office meant that apart from the (mis)fortunes of the sugar industry and other agricultural export crops, relatively little attention was devoted to the problems of the wider society. The eruption and persistence of unrest in the 1930s reflected the lack of institutional mechanisms for the expression of dissent. The findings of the Moyne Commission pointed to the unhealthy consequences of the lack of representation which afflicted colonial administration in the West Indies.<sup>24</sup> In effect, crown colony government, beyond its failure to cope with the economic problems confronting these territories, had become authoritarian in both principle and practice and unresponsive to the concerns of the non-white majorities.

One of the best indicators of the ethos of repression which informed crown colony government in the West Indies was the situation facing the labouring classes in these colonies. The end of slavery in the British West Indies in the 1830s had created an agricultural proletariat largely dispossessed of land for exploitation on its own behalf. Government policy had been consistently guided by the demand of the landed interests for cheap labour under their effective control. As a consequence, the administrations and planters neglected the development of a free labour market or labour unions.<sup>25</sup> The end of slavery had not

(4) lack of representation

diminished the desire of planters for coercive labour systems and after emancipation labour policy was directed at finding an alternative to slavery -- indentured labour, planter collusion to set wage levels, refusal to legislate labour ordinances or enforce those in existence, the use of child labour, and, ultimately, the use of militias and imperial forces to suppress discontent arising out of adverse conditions affecting the labouring classes in the West Indies. This enduring hostility to the self-organisation of labour in the British West Indies continued until the third decade of the 20th century. The sentiment was shared by governments in London, administrations in the territories, and the landed and commercial interests in the colonies.<sup>26</sup>

Given the depth of economic privation, the absence of mechanisms for dealing with labour disputes, and the authoritarian instinct of the colonial state, it was little wonder that the riots of the 1930s assumed the scale they did.<sup>27</sup> The crisis revealed the economic decline, the political decay, and the social dislocation that underlay the colonial order in the West Indies. The riots in Trinidad and in Jamaica showed that the local administrations had been caught off-guard by the scale of discontent. In effect, the crisis of the 1930s in the West Indian colonies shattered the post-emancipation order and changed the political climate in the territories and London. According to Macmillan:

The tragedy of the West Indies now needs no emphasis as a warning of the dangers of a complacent neglect which threatens the very foundations of the British Empire all over the world. We cannot afford to allow it to continue to be a habit to wait until there is riot and bloodshed before taking notice of the grievances of our fellow subjects in any of these Dependencies.<sup>28</sup>

### The Emerging Challenge to Imperial Authority

[T]he discontent that underlies the disturbances of recent years is a phenomenon of a different character, representing no longer a mere blind protest against a worsening of conditions, but a positive demand for the creation of new conditions that will render possible a better and less restricted life. It is the coexistence of the new demand for better conditions with the unfavourable economic trend that is the crux of the West Indian problem of the present day.<sup>29</sup>

The Moyne Commission report acknowledged a phenomenon that had become a fact of life in the West Indies -- that the subjects of colonial rule were increasingly prepared to challenge the legitimacy of existing conditions, as a result of the shift in the political climate. The sources of

West Indian discontent were not restricted to the dire economic conditions of the 1930s. The lack of representative government for the majority of the population had been a continuing criticism of British colonial rule from the late nineteenth century. The introduction of the crown colony system of government in the wake of the Morant Bay unrest had not been accepted with equanimity by people of colour who had been disenfranchised by the reduction in the size of the electorate. In 1939 the vote was open to less than 10 percent of the population in the more populous territories such as Barbados, British Guiana, Jamaica, and Trinidad. There had been an insistent demand for the extension of the franchise to allow for wider representation of a cross section of the population. These demands had largely been articulated by the educated and smaller property holders who sought to challenge the restrictions upon the exercise of the franchise and access to political office. The restrictions excluded them from systematic engagement in the political life of their societies.<sup>30</sup>

By the end of the First World War, the sense of exclusion had begun to transform itself into a sense of grievance. This sentiment fueled a challenge to minority rule that was the fundamental underpinning of the political order in the British West Indies. One stimulus to the growth of a sense of grievance was the experience of service in the British armed forces during the 1914-18 war. The War Office was initially opposed to the use of black and coloured troops from the West Indies, though white West Indians did not encounter a similar resistance. West Indians of colour finally saw service in the Middle East and Europe, though not without determined efforts by the British Army to restrict them to labour battalions. Finally, while awaiting transportation back to the Caribbean at the end of the war, some of the West Indian troops mutinied in Taranto, Italy, against the discriminatory treatment they encountered.<sup>31</sup>

A second factor in the growing challenge to the white supremacist ethic of colonial rule was the impact of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association upon sentiment in the West Indies, from whence he originated. Both his political prominence in the United States and his astute propaganda efforts across the African diaspora demonstrated the possibilities of black political mobilization and the legitimacy of anticolonial sentiment in a West Indian context of disaffection with the existing order.<sup>32</sup> Garvey's influence was also significant as it represented the waning of the isolation that had affected West Indian life for much of the 19th century, and led to a growing awareness by West

How much  
can we see  
of the  
1914-18 war  
1914-18 war

outcomes  
of riots?

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Indians of other realities against which their own situation could be compared. The impact of the Harlem Renaissance, in which the Jamaican poet Claude McKay played a major role, upon life and culture in the British West Indies is an aspect of West Indian history that is yet to receive systematic scholarly examination.<sup>33</sup>

By the early 1930s, the changing climate in the West Indian colonies had begun to influence political debates and strategy among the subjects of colonial rule. In 1932 the Colonial Office announced the establishment of a commission to investigate the possibility of some form of federation between Trinidad and the other British islands in the Eastern Caribbean. Leaders of political reform groups arranged a meeting in Roseau, Dominica, to articulate a coordinated view to the Colonial Office. At that meeting, while there was little agreement on the pace of implementation, it was accepted that there should be self-government and, after considerable debate, the gradual implementation of adult suffrage as part of any process of political reform. The report of the conference expressed the belief that:

Instead of a fundamentally harmonious and fruitful co-operation between government and governed, there exists in most of the West Indian islands two hostile camps: one displaying an arrogant and calculated contempt of popular desires and opinions, and the other a sullen and suspicious resentment of all the acts of Government, a state of affairs which, inevitably, reacts unfavourably on both camps to the detriment of peace and progress of the community as a whole.<sup>34</sup>

As had been the case with previous efforts by the West Indian middle class leaders to affect policy emanating from the Colonial Office, little heed was paid to the demand either for self-government or universal suffrage. The possibility of federation for these territories was restricted to the Leeward and Windward Islands of the Eastern Caribbean since the Trinidadian business community was reluctant to participate in a federation with the smaller territories. Nonetheless, it was evident that the challenge to crown colony rule was no longer being undertaken within the individual territories but was now a subject of political activity on a regional basis in the West Indies.<sup>35</sup>

But even as the imperial government was exploring its options in the Eastern Caribbean, the West Indian intellectual C.L.R. James published a powerful critique of the crown colony system of government, *The Case for West Indian Self Government*, in Britain.<sup>36</sup> James's prescient critique of crown colony rule captured the spirit of the emerging challenge to colonial rule in the West Indies over the next three decades. The essay

provided a fascinating insight into race relations in the West Indian colonies in the early years of this century, but its major objective was to make the case that crown colony government was an anachronism in the West Indies. James argued that the notions of white supremacy that underwrote crown colony rule were obsolete. In addition, he sought to show that the concentration of power in the hands of the governor was conducive to the abuse of power and was a disservice to the population of the West Indies. Written from the perspective of an informed and highly educated subject of colonial rule, James's essay attested to the increasing legitimacy accorded the opinion of the West Indian middle class leaders who met in Dominica in 1932 when he expressed the view that West Indian society reflected a situation in which governors and governed were on either side of a gulf which no tinkering would bridge, and that political energy was diverted into other channels or simply wasted.<sup>37</sup>

It was this atmosphere of polarization and the isolation of colonial officials that Macmillan observed in the West Indies during his visit that later resulted in the publication of *Warning from the West Indies*. As he castigated the crown colony form of government, Macmillan acknowledged that the West Indian middle class "feel sometimes with justification - that they themselves could govern the country as well or better than some of the present rulers."<sup>38</sup> He pointed to the "pessimistic outlook on the future" which had taken hold of the West Indian planter class, which was also able to "infect even administrative officials with their own doubts and fears."<sup>39</sup> Macmillan's comments pointed to the intellectual and political bankruptcy that had overtaken the crown colony system of government in the British West Indies by the mid-1930s and the sense of unease in official and planter circles which would be amplified by the riots over the next several years. Both James and Macmillan had identified the key issues affecting West Indian life in the 1930s - the crisis of confidence in white minority government and the increasing self-assertiveness of the West Indian middle class.

In addition to criticisms about the manifest failure of crown colony rule effectively to represent the majority of the population, there was also an increasing willingness to question the competence of colonial officials sent to the West Indies.<sup>40</sup> The low levels of remuneration offered to officials resulted in the West Indies being considered a less than desirable posting and the quality of people appointed reflected that fact.<sup>41</sup> In addition, for younger or more ambitious officials, appoint-

emergence  
of regionalism

ments in the West Indies could be used as a stepping stone to more lucrative appointments elsewhere.<sup>42</sup> For older officials, a governorship was attractive if similar opportunities were not forthcoming in Asia or Africa. As a consequence, there was little commitment to the West Indies since the career opportunities for officials seemed less attractive than elsewhere.<sup>43</sup> Professor T.S. Simey, after his service in the Caribbean during the Second World War, pointed to another problem affecting colonial officials: "As is the case of colonial policy in general, there is far too ready a belief that the mere fact that the British colonial civil servant has received a full education in Great Britain qualifies him to perform these tasks."<sup>44</sup> Simey was of the view that the training of colonial service officials needed attention and improvement as "the spectacle of an ill-informed civil servant meeting an astute West Indian politician in public debate on political questions is an unhappy one."<sup>45</sup>

It was at this level of political engagement that the undercurrent of racial tension was most evident. The issue of race had become both a cause and a consequence of the polarisation that was intrinsic to West Indian life in the 1930s. The Royal Commission recognized the growing level of racial tension, and acknowledged that the recruitment of officials from outside of the region was a factor in the increasing levels of racial animosity:

It cannot too strongly be stressed that irresponsible and unmeasured criticism of imported officers, whether on the grounds of colour or as part of a political campaign, detracts from their usefulness, takes up in the time answering of it time which could be more profitably employed on constructive work and is a potent cause of the racial prejudice which was so strongly deprecated by all with whom we discussed it.<sup>46</sup>

As James had observed in his essay, assumptions of "white supremacy" were no longer sustainable in West Indian political life as a result of the emergence of a West Indian middle class whose sense of accomplishment had rendered those notions obsolete.<sup>47</sup> It was inevitable that the coloured middle class would betray their frustration with the notions of racial privilege that were intrinsic to colonial rule. Racial tensions were also a critical factor in the unrest that shook Trinidad in 1937, where the presence of South African employees in one of the oil companies was identified by the Commission investigating the disturbances as one source of worker discontent. There were also tensions in the oil industry because "a number of young white men have been taken on in the higher posts to the exclusion of senior coloured men."<sup>48</sup>

The rise in racial tension in the colonies was worsened by the Italian invasion of Ethiopia which contributed to the unrest. In October 1935 the colonial secretary, concerned about the reports sent to him from the governors in the West Indies "that the Italo-Abyssinian conflict has aroused feelings of indignation amongst the negro population of those dependencies" indicated his support for a request from the governor of the Windward Islands for "one of His Majesty's ships to be cruising in the Windward Islands as soon as possible."<sup>49</sup> In Trinidad, the governor acknowledged that the Italo-Abyssinian war had fostered "agitation" which had contributed to the unrest in 1937.<sup>50</sup> In 1939, the colonial secretary, in a memorandum on Colonial Development and Welfare, informed the Chancellor of the Exchequer that respect among colonial subjects for British authority "was to some extent shaken by our alleged 'betrayal' of Abyssinia."<sup>51</sup> As MacDonald recognized, British policy on the Italo-Ethiopian war had raised considerations of imperial policy and race which could not be easily separated and the crisis in the West Indian colonies had revealed the growing divergence between the imperial governments and colonial populations on this issue.

The reaction among West Indians to the evidence of the bankruptcy in the colonial order was not restricted to simple criticism or street protest in the colonies. The unrest had sparked the mobilisation of the West Indian diaspora in the United States and Britain to push for changes in the colonies. The migration of West Indians from the 1890s onward had created a West Indian diaspora which remained engaged in the affairs of the territories. The Garvey movement had sustained networks of interaction among West Indians in the United States, Britain and the West Indies. By the late 1930s, the politically active West Indian community in New York, which had begun to assume an influence in the politics of black New York out of proportion to their actual numbers, sent an emissary to the West Indies who was instrumental in the creation of the Barbados Labour Party.<sup>52</sup>

In addition, the League of Coloured People in London in 1938 sought to mobilise support for far-reaching changes in the West Indies - among which were the participation of a representative of the trades unions in the proposed Royal Commission, the extension of the franchise to a wider range of the population, land settlement, and universal free education.<sup>53</sup> In June 1938 the League sent a resolution to the colonial secretary calling for the establishment of a University of the West Indies, universal adult suffrage, a self-governing federation of the West Indies,

Political  
State of  
Islands  
Crisis 1930s

According to  
Fraser, race tension  
Place in crisis?

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~~Fraser~~

Role of  
migration  
to colonies  
to improve  
events

and the appointment to the proposed Royal Commission of "at least two representatives of West Indian labour."<sup>54</sup> In September of the same year, the League passed a resolution at a meeting attended by Lord Olivier and the Bishop of Jamaica regretting "the absence, as from the terms of reference, of any provision for consideration of the political aspect of the life of these territories, an aspect which is indispensable to any thorough investigation of conditions."<sup>55</sup>

In a draft reply to the letter containing this resolution, the colonial secretary indicated that even though the Royal Commission would be largely concerned with social and economic conditions, it "will, however, no doubt wish to hear evidence regarding the Constitution and organisation of each Government so far as these may be relevant to social and economic problems, and the words 'and matters connected therewith' were put into their terms of reference deliberately so that consideration of the constitutional or any other aspect should not be excluded."<sup>56</sup> It was evident that the Colonial Office recognised that political reform was an issue that could not be avoided by the Moyne Commission.

Parallel with the initiatives by the League of Coloured Peoples was the publication of *The West Indies Today* by the International African Service Bureau (IASB). The pamphlet provided both an analysis of conditions in the West Indies and suggestions about future policy for these territories. Like the League of Coloured Peoples, the IASB advocated universal suffrage, a federation of the West Indies, with cabinet government accountable to the legislature. In addition, the IASB advocated the development of industries in the territories, the expansion of the tourist industry, and larger government support for the growth and diversification of the peasant sector, if necessary through the break up of existing plantations. Both in tone and content, the IASB pamphlet was more radical than the proposals from the League of Coloured Peoples and showed the growing engagement of West Indians abroad with the future of the territories.<sup>57</sup>

West Indian political activists in the territories were also debating the future of the colonies, and the decision to send the Royal Commission to the West Indies in 1938 was seized upon by the "political articulates" to draft a series of recommendations to place before the Commission.<sup>58</sup> The announcement of the Commission came after the inauguration of the British Guiana and West India Labour Congress (BGWILC) in British Guiana in 1938. Following upon the rise of labour militancy during the previous three years, and with increasing interest demonstrated by the

British Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party in conditions in the West Indies, West Indian labour leaders, emulating the approach adopted by the leaders of the Eastern Caribbean reform associations and groups, began to adopt a regional approach to relations with their British counterparts.<sup>59</sup> Notwithstanding their recent meeting in Georgetown, the leaders of the BGWILC arranged another meeting in November 1938 in Trinidad, at which it was decided to present a draft bill to the Moyne Commission proposing a federation of the West Indian colonies, on the basis of full internal self-government and universal adult suffrage.

It was obvious that the leaders were no longer interested in reforming the crown colony system of government or in further delays in the implementation of a democratic order in the colonies. The debates among members of the West Indian diaspora and activists within the colonies had begun to establish a consensus in favour of greater self-government, universal suffrage, and a West Indian federation. The West Indian activists had staked out a position that was considerably in advance of the eventual recommendations submitted by the Moyne Commission to the imperial government. This agenda, articulated in the wake of the unrest between 1935 and 1938, remained at the core of West Indian political affairs for the next two decades as the platform for imperial disengagement.

The establishment of the BGWILC in 1938 also confirmed that there was a serious effort underway to capitalise upon the emergence of labour militancy in the unrest of the 1930s. The unrest had served as the catalyst for a new alliance among middle class political activists interested in political reform and labour leaders seeking allies in the effort to institutionalise the labour unions and the other gains achieved as a result of the disturbances. This new alliance was the basis of the development of political parties in the British West Indies.<sup>60</sup> The disturbances had catapulted the politics of labour to the centre of West Indian affairs and that development moved the imperial government much further and faster than any previous challenge to the order established since the end of slavery. The new movements were determined not to lose the momentum that had been generated over the previous three years. It was evident that the search for a new political dispensation would involve both the imperial government and the newly mobilised coloured majorities in these colonies. By the time the Moyne Commission embarked upon its visit to the region, the issue that faced West Indians was not if change was coming, but how quickly, and on whose behalf.



### Imperial Hubris and the Moyne Commission

Faced with the growing evidence of the bankruptcy of the existing West Indian order, the imperial government gradually came to the realisation that its *mission civilisatrice* had to be reinvigorated.<sup>61</sup> The mercantilist resurgence of the 1930s had emphasised the importance of the empire to Britain's role in the international political order and its domestic equilibrium in a period of intense economic and political competition among the major powers for access to raw materials and markets. The coincidence of the crisis in the West Indies with wider international tensions had elevated the importance of Britain's response to colonial disorder. It was no longer sufficient to treat the situation in the Caribbean as a matter of labour unrest and subsidies for sugar – rather Britain was being provided with an opportunity to revitalise its imperial pretensions in an adverse international context.<sup>62</sup> The establishment of the West India Royal Commission was perceived as providing breathing room for the development of a new policy. The colonial secretary apparently saw the new policy as a way of impressing the colonies, undermining the challenges from critics of British imperial authority, and creating a favourable climate of opinion at home and in neutral countries.<sup>63</sup> In one fell swoop, the colonial secretary apparently hoped to prove that Britain's management of empire had not become flaccid, after acknowledging in June 1938 that "any further, steady deterioration will prove very damaging to Great Britain's reputation as a Colonial Power. It is in my view imperative that, at a time when the 'colonial question' is being ventilated at home and abroad, we should ourselves be as far as possible above reproach."<sup>64</sup>

It was in the context of this emerging consensus within the British government – Britain's need to establish its reputation as an enlightened colonial power – that the recommendations of the Moyne Commission should be seen. The centrepiece of the recommendations was the establishment of a Development and Welfare Organisation for the Caribbean which would oversee the expenditure of imperial funds to finance social development and welfare projects in the West Indian colonies. The scale of the deprivation revealed by the unrest and confirmed by the findings of the Royal Commission provoked a sense of embarrassment which encouraged a loosening of the tight-fisted grip of the Treasury over expenditure for social improvements in the colonies.<sup>65</sup> According to Simey: "The novelty of the recommendations of the Royal

Commission lay in the fact that so great importance was attached to the remoulding of the apparatus of government and of the West Indian way of life to meet contemporary requirements. Never before had so positive an approach been made to the problem of government in a colonial territory."<sup>66</sup>

The creation of a parallel bureaucracy entrusted with this task should also be seen as a mechanism for circumventing the problem of poor quality of staff entrusted with the execution of colonial policy in the territories. The establishment of the Development and Welfare Organisation, with an independent secretariat reporting directly to London, should be seen for what it was – a vote of no confidence in the performance of the existing colonial administrators in the West Indies. It also amounted to a direct shift in authority over the West Indian colonies since the Colonial Office had now assumed direct responsibility for financing and implementing its new strategy of colonial development and welfare.<sup>67</sup> The Royal Commission was remarkably forthright on this issue, indicating that the territorial governments needed to improve the emoluments for, and competence of, their officials since the imperial government could not be expected to subsidise salaries for colonial administrators.<sup>68</sup>

On the critical issue of political reform, the Commission was much less forthcoming in its recommendations. While willing to concede that there was a growing political consciousness among the subjects of colonial rule, and that proposals for social reform needed to be accompanied by constitutional changes, it was evident that the Commission was more concerned with proposals "thought to be judicious in existing circumstances." As a consequence, it argued for the continuation of the crown colony system of government with greater attentiveness by the governors to the selection of "representatives of popular opinion" who could "be given more opportunity to influence policy, and some of them may perhaps be converted from criticism to co-operation, if an arrangement can be made whereby they are more closely associated with the work of the executive." It was clear that a benevolent autocracy was the best that the Royal Commission had to offer.<sup>69</sup>

The issue of universal suffrage was much more complex and raised a variety of concerns that did not prove easy to resolve. The members of the Commission were themselves divided on this issue. Some members advocated the immediate introduction of universal suffrage, while others were only prepared to advocate that the electorate should be

expanded to "as great an extent as local conditions make possible or prudent." As a consequence, the Commission recommended that each territory should set up a committee to establish the qualifications for the extension of the franchise. One of the critical concerns was the practice in some colonies of excluding women from the vote, which led some of the members of the Commission to advocate the immediate implementation of universal suffrage.<sup>70</sup> The critical factor that seemed to have militated against universal suffrage was the concern that it would hasten the pace of constitutional reform -- a possibility that was undoubtedly considered too threatening to the authority of both the governors and the Colonial Office.

The proposals of the Royal Commission were unexceptional in their deference to judiciousness and captured the spirit of redemption that had energised the Colonial Office since the riots had shaken confidence in the exercise of "trusteeship." They also revealed that the Colonial Office was acting upon the assumption that the new rhetoric of "Development and Welfare" would prove to be an acceptable alternative to the demands for universal suffrage and self-government that had become the watchwords of the new political movements in the West Indies. In hindsight, the proposals of the Royal Commission, even as it advanced an effective strategy for redefining the imperial mission and the role of the imperial government in the administration of the empire, proved to be the opening act in the process of imperial disengagement that swept the British empire after 1945.

## Conclusion

The West Indian crisis of the 1930s heralded a major transformation in both the territories and imperial vision. In the territories, the social unrest arising from economic distress was a catalyst for the mobilisation of political sentiment in favour of democratic self-government based upon universal suffrage. The emergence of regional and territorial movements linking the middle classes and working classes had transformed the climate and context of politics. The activism of the West Indian diaspora on both sides of the Atlantic in response to the crisis provided resources which were channelled into support for the demands of West Indians for a larger stake in their political future. By the 1930s, the West Indian populations and "political articulates" had come to the recognition that British imperial rule had achieved an undistinguished

record since the end of slavery and that their future would have to be shaped by their own efforts and designs. In effect, the 1930s opened the era of West Indian nationalist assertion which shook the foundations of British imperial authority and paved the way for decolonisation after 1945.

On the other hand, the imperial government responded to the crisis by reinvigorating its *mission civilisatrice* through the adoption of a strategy of Colonial Development and Welfare. It was an attempt to redeem the failure of the colonial administrations to reconstruct West Indian society in the century since emancipation. The new policy failed to recognise that the legitimacy of the colonial order had been undermined by the politics of exclusion on the basis of race and class that had become the organising principle of West Indian society after slavery. The crisis of authority in the West Indies was not restricted to the territorial governments, but extended to the entire notion of a *mission civilisatrice* that had developed in the nineteenth century. The new policy adopted in the wake of the Royal Commission reflected the hubris of the imperial government. The Royal Commission's report revealed the inability of the imperial government to come to terms with the emerging nationalist agenda in the West Indies. It was an early example of the recurring problem that would bedevil the imperial government as it sought to negotiate the twilight of empire in Asia, the Mediterranean, and Africa after 1945.

## Notes

1. I would like to acknowledge the comments of the members of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Seminar on "Reconsidering the British Empire" held at the University of Texas at Austin, 24 June-15 August 1996, to whom an earlier version of this paper was presented. The suggestions of Roy Austin, William Roger Louis, and Ronald Robinson were particularly helpful as I revised it for publication. My discussions over the years with Lloyd Best and Anthony Hopkins were very influential in shaping the ideas expressed here and in my analysis of Caribbean political economy. Research for this paper was conducted with the support of the NEH and the Research and Graduate Studies Office of Pennsylvania State University.
2. This essay focuses upon the West Indian context of imperial policy making and illustrates the reasons for the emerging sense of imperial inadequacy in the region. It departs from the standard accounts of imperial policy during