

"Democracy" for the West Indies

By George Padmore

From England Mr. Padmore continues his observations of British Colonial Policy as it is applied to his native West Indies

THE rich will do anything for the poor except get off their backs. Similarly the British imperialists will do anything for their subject peoples except grant them self-determination. The reason for this is obvious. They know that once the colonial peoples enjoyed real unfettered political democracy, sooner or later the economic stranglehold of European vested interests would be broken. And the British capitalist classes, especially those with colonial investments are determined not to give up their "right" to exploit the native peoples. This is the basic reason why Britain has resisted and will continue to resist every effort on the part of the Indian people for political liberty and human freedom, even while appealing to them to help fight for "democracy!" "Democracy," said Thucydides, "cannot govern an Empire . . . Empire is despotism."

The tragedy of India is being repeated in the West Indies. Like typical Bourbons, our imperialist masters seem to learn nothing and to forget nothing. Despite the unmistakable temper of the West Indian masses, urging for a fundamental change in their economic and political conditions, the Colonial Office is trying to palm them off with a makeshift Constitution. While seemingly democratic, the so-called reforms just granted to Trinidad and Jamaica reserve all essential powers in the hands of the Governors. The old discredited Crown Colony system is dressed up to look progressive, but the Colonial Office has not succeeded in hoodwinking the West Indians.

"We see neither progress nor reform in this much-publicised blessing," writes *The People* of Trinidad: Giving judgment, it continues: "Indeed, we find ourselves in this dilemma as regards the new constitution: we are wondering whether we over-estimate the subtlety of the Colonial Office or whether they under-estimate ours. There is a good strong American word by which all such acts are explained—bluff! It is particularly apt in this instance. Nothing has been gained by this so-called reform, and if the Government plays its cards well, its position, not that of the people of Trinidad, will be strengthened by this clever piece of political strategy. More care in the selection of its nominated members—and, presto, the trick is done. It is simple arithmetic: three officials plus six nominated make nine,

the people elect nine from those of their number who earn more than 160 dollars per month (£10 per week). With the chances of unity greater among the nominated and official members, the result is a foregone conclusion! The Governor will hardly need to use his new power of veto. We regret that we cannot respect this sort of thing. A few more local men will have the opportunity to hold forth in the Council Chamber. But that is all."

Trinidad is the second largest of the Caribbean colonies, but the most developed, thanks to its oil and asphalt industries. Nevertheless, the island is primarily agricultural, the chief products being sugar, cocoa and citrus fruit. The population is cosmopolitan—Africans, East Indians, Chinese, Portuguese, Jews and European descendants of early French and Spanish settlers. The English comprise chiefly Government officials, missionaries and representatives of banking, commercial and trading interests.

The country is ruled by a Governor assisted by a council of 25 members, the majority of whom are Government officials and individuals nominated to the Council by the Governor. These latter represent various industrial, commercial and agricultural interests. Seven elected members are returned to the Council every four years on a limited franchise. These individuals are usually native born—white as well as colored.

The Property Requirement

At the time of the last election there were 30,911 registered voters out of a population of 456,006—that is, 6.5 per cent. Economic reasons account for this small percentage. A native must earn £62.10.0. per annum before being registered as a voter. The average income of an agricultural worker is hardly more than £40 to £45 per annum, and the laboring class consists chiefly of this type of worker. Consequently, the vast majority of the population, who stand most in need of economic and social relief, are deprived of any part in choos-

ing those who govern them. This is not the only handicap, however. Prospective members must own real estate to the value of £2,000 or derive £200 per annum therefrom; or have resided in the electoral district for one year or own therein real estate of £5,000 in value or giving income of £400 per annum. The result is that even the lower middle classes, who might be able to qualify as voters, have not the possibility of being represented by one of their own class, much less the workers and the peasants.

There is nothing in the new constitution which will remedy this undemocratic practice, as it make no immediate provision for abolishing property qualifications. The most that has been proposed is that the Governor should appoint a committee to examine the possibilities of widening the franchise, but even this will not take place until after a trial period lasting until 1948!

In actual membership of the Legislative Council there is to be a reduction from 26 to 15. Of these 9 will be officials and 9 elected. In short, the people's representatives are to be increased by two. This constitutes the only real change. To counter-balance the equalization, the Governor will have a casting vote, and in the final resort, can exercise powers of veto.

The new arrangement for Jamaica proposes the introduction of "universal adult suffrage, in which the property qualification would be abolished, and an enlarged Legislative Council, to comprise approximately double the present number of elected members, with nominated members, and three, instead of five, ex-officio members, the total number to be not less than 40."

Admittedly the introduction of adult suffrage will be a progressive step on the road to political democracy, but why negate its benefits by retaining the high property and income qualifications for candidates to the Council? For while allowing the workers and peasants to vote, it will preclude them from returning representatives from their own class.

The common people will not be satisfied with these halfway reforms. Candidature based on income and property qualifications must be entirely abolished. A small deposit should be sufficient to guard against irresponsible candidates.

Governor Retains Veto

The ex-official members will be re-

duced from five to three, but the Governor will continue to nominate ten members. In this way "all important sections and interests would receive adequate representation," says the Secretary of State for Colonies.

Who and what are these interests: The sugar planters and banana combines, the shipping and trading companies, which dominate the Chamber of Commerce; the industrialists and big employers of labor.

Although the people's representatives will be in the majority, the imperialists and their native capitalist allies need not be afraid that the elected members will adopt socialistic legislation. As the "Times" has reminded us, "the Governor, who has always possessed certain emergency powers, especially in finance, is now given the right to over-ride his Legislative Council should that be required by the interests of public order, public faith or good government."

The whole business of the constitutions was conducted in traditional Whitehall manner. When they were ready, the Governors of the islands were called to London for consultation, and the accomplished facts put before Parliament and the people of the islands. The same "take it or leave it" attitude was adopted over the leasing of bases to America. And when the matter was raised in the House of Commons, that Canadian cracker, Beverley Baxter, M.P. had the impertinence to declare: "At such a moment we are not going to say to Americans, 'wait a minute, the Parliament of Great Britain wants to talk about terms and color ban and nigger problems. . . ." We can afford to ignore this Tory mountebank. What is significant, however, neither the Speaker nor Mr. Attlee, Lord Privy Seal, rebuked Baxter for the use of such an offensive term as "nigger," in reference to colored British subjects. Parliament is fast degenerating into a Reichstag.

Power Is Complete

Those who are unfamiliar with the prerogatives of a Colonial Governor will find it difficult to realize their complete power. They report to one man, and one man alone—the Secretary of State for the Colonies—to whom they owe their appointments. In his person a Crown Colony Governor symbolizes a sort of trinity. As the representative of the King, constitutionally he "can do no wrong." As head of the Executive, he is Prime Minister, and thirdly, when presiding over the Legislature, he is Speaker. It obviously takes a very bold man to criticize such a three-fold personality.

"Any labor leader or exponent of progressive thought was at the mercy of the Governor, whose judgment could not be

challenged and who might constitute himself prosecutor, judge and jailer," declared David Adams, M.P., addressing a recent conference of the National Council of Civil Liberties in London, in reference to colonial disabilities.

How is the business of Crown Colony government actually conducted? The Governor has a Cabinet or Executive Council (called in Jamaica the Privy Council), made up of members selected by him. Usually they are the heads of the most important civil and military departments, augmented by one or two native Quislings—colored men who have demonstrated their loyalty to the imperialists over a long period by opposing all progressive measures which might prove to the interests of the common people.

The Executive controls all financial matters, and is the body which formulates all legislation later proposed before the Legislative Council for approval or disapproval. The powers of this Executive Council, however, are purely consultative, as the Governor is under no obligation to accept the advice of the members. Significantly enough, the new recommendations do not greatly affect the composition or power of the Executive. Such trifling changes as are to be made are in the Legislative Council. The two additional members to the Trinidad Legislative Council and the 14 to the Jamaican Council can change executive policy in no essential detail. This constitutes the essential feature of Crown Colony administration. Even in Ceylon, where the Donoughmore constitution—that Labor Party gift to the Ceylonese natives—allows wider representation and to all intents and purposes affords greater opportunities for the promulgation of progressive measures, the Governor has the final word. Despite the fact that the Ceylonese ministers have administrative responsibility and are permitted to propose and decide legislation, even financial, the Governor can over-ride, at his own discretion, any measure adopted by a majority of the State Council.

When British imperialists offer a constitution to the colonial peoples it is like Greeks bearing gifts—something to beware of. They are trying to bamboozle the West Indians, just as the East Indians, but they will succeed no better in one way than in the other.

West Indians Dissatisfied

It is quite certain that West Indian public opinion will not be satisfied with the proposed niggardly reforms. The insignificant constitutional gestures made to the native peoples of Trinidad and Jamaica completely ignore the solid political claims of the colonies, while leaving out entirely the other Carib-

bean countries, British Guiana and British Honduras.

It is scandalous that some three million people should be ruled by about a dozen separate governors and legislatures. Each colony is at present obliged to struggle to maintain its own medical and health services, education and agricultural departments, police and judiciary, and other essential functions of modern government. The Governors alone together receive more than £30,000 (\$120,000) per annum in salaries and allowances. Is it to be wondered at that these colonies are so poor?

Today every progressive individual realizes the advantages of the political federation of national and geographical units as the best way of promoting the economic and social wellbeing of the people. So much so, that even non-socialists favor a Federated Europe. Nevertheless, the Colonial Office continues to ignore the popular demand for West Indian Federation.

"Whatever might be the ultimate future of the West Indies as a whole," declares Lord Moyne, "we could not look to any uniform system of government in the component parts."

West Indians have more in common than the peoples of Europe. They belong in the main to the same ethnic stock—Africans. They speak the same language, profess the same Christian religion, and have assimilated the same cultural outlook. In fact, they have more in common among themselves than have, say, the English and the Welsh, or the English and the Scotch, to say nothing of the Irish.

Surely it is not the sea that stands in the way of federation? No, the British imperialists find it advantageous to keep them separated from each other. It fits in better with their historic policy of "divide and rule."

Colonial peoples are getting very sick of this sort of thing. They are tired of being ruled over and bossed by foreigners, and reject the British imperialist theory of the "white man's burden" as much as they repudiate the arrogant "master race" claims of the Nazis.

As President Roosevelt recently reminded the world that "there never has been, is not now, and never will be any race of people (including the English—G.P.) fit to serve as masters over their fellow men . . . We believe that any nationality, no matter how small, has the inherent right to its own nationhood." This, too, is our claim.

NAACP Conference

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