

The Legacy of Empire

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A view from the Caribbean

By Sir Ronald Sanders KCMG AMⁱ

A former British Foreign Secretary famously observed: “When Empires crumble, they tend to crumble exceedingly small”. So it is with the British Empire in the Caribbean now made up of 12 politically independent small countries and a handful of even smaller Overseas Territories.

The Legacy of Empire in the Caribbean is a mixed one – some aspects are good, many aspects are bad, and one in particular is ugly.

I will start with the good aspects:

The Good:

Language

The first is language.

Because English has become the first language of international commerce, the Legacy of the English language in the former British colonies has been beneficial to the English-Speaking Caribbean countries in a range of global transactions.

Its downside is that West Indians felt no need to learn Spanish and Portuguese – the languages of their larger region.

Governance

With regard to institutions related to governance, it is fair to say that important legacies of Empire were: an established legal and judicial system; a functional public service; and, at independence, written constitutions based on the rule of law.

In many ways however, these institutions – apart from the independence constitutions – were set up to serve the interests of Britain. The civil service is a particular example where the role of a colonial power group was to carry out the instructions of the British Colonial Office rather than to bolster policies locally devised by local officials.

A former Prime Minister of Barbados, Errol Barrow, described the civil service in the pre-independence Caribbean as “an army of occupation sent down to the area by the colonial office”.¹

Nonetheless, independent judiciaries and legal systems and a functional non-political civil service were two important legacies of Empire in the Caribbean.

Independence constitutions with electoral procedures and representation based on the Westminster model are also a feature of the system of governance in the now independent former British colonies in the Caribbean, and in those that still retain association with Britain as Overseas Territories.

It should be noted that until recently, the 12 Independent English-Speaking countries of the Caribbean retained the British Privy Council as their final Appellate Court. In 2005, three of those countries joined the Caribbean Court of Justice as their final Court of Appeal and others are contemplating doing the same once the obstacle of entrenched Constitutional requirements, involving referenda, can be overcome.

The appropriateness of the Westminster model and its electoral system has also been questioned in many Caribbean countries – and more recently by the British Government itself in relation to its Overseas Territory, the Turks and Caicos Islands. Still, the system has basically

¹ Errol Barrow, Barbados, House of Assembly Debates, Official Report, 11 June 1963, p.22

worked in these countries although, unlike in Britain itself, it lacks robust checks and balances that would underscore free and fair election administration, supervision, and conduct.

Education

Basic education in the Caribbean – largely missionary led - ensured literacy in English at an early stage. Then in 1948 – fourteen years before the first English-Speaking Caribbean country became independent – the University College of the West Indies was established in Jamaica to serve the region as a whole.

It was established on the initiative of the post-war British Labour Government – as were Makerere in Uganda and Ibadan in Nigeria.

The University's second campus was established in 1960, two years before the independence of Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago.

There is no question that the establishment of the University of the West Indies – open to students from the entire English-Speaking Caribbean – in 1948 was a boon to the area.

Albeit late in the day, it widened the opportunity for Caribbean nationals to take over from British colonial civil servants in a variety of disciplines, and made them better able than many nationals of British colonies in other parts of the world to manage the challenges of independence.

Additionally, while the British education system was set-up in individual Caribbean countries to serve British colonial interests and was narrow in that context, it was a solid grounding in basic education, sufficient for a region of 5 million people to produce three Nobel Laureates – one in Economics and two in Literature,² and, more recently, for one to be awarded the coveted Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry. Additionally, Caribbean nationals have served – and are serving - in high capacities in Commonwealth and International Organisations, in international

² Sir Arthur Lewis (St Lucia) Nobel Laureate for Economics (1979); Derek Walcott (St Lucia) Nobel Laureate for Literature (1992); Sir Vidya S Naipaul (Trinidad and Tobago) Nobel Laureate for Literature (2001);

business institutions and in international Courts in a manner that is disproportionate to the small number of the region's population.

Their accomplishments belie the doctrine of inferiority that underpinned the excuse for slavery and indentured labour in the Caribbean.

But it should be noted that the basic and limited education system was not matched by industrialisation or the building of infrastructure that could create employment or professional opportunities for the tertiary educated. As a major consequence, more than 60% of the region's tertiary educated people have had to migrate to developed nations such as Britain, Canada and the United States of America.

The Bad

One-crop Economies

One of the bad legacies of Empire in the Caribbean was the concentration in production of one crop – sugar, and the non-industrialisation of the economies.

Sugar production for the benefit of British conglomerates remained the mainstay of many Caribbean economies even after independence.

In the small islands of the Caribbean – Dominica, St Vincent and the Grenadines, and Grenada – when sugar proved to be no longer viable, British interests turned to another one-crop economy, bananas.

Production in both these sectors was based on low wages and poor conditions of work. While British companies benefitted first from Commonwealth preferences in the UK market and then preferences in the European Market after Britain joined what was then the European Economic Community, workers in the Caribbean remained poor with all the consequences that flowed from poverty.

In 300 years of colonialism, Britain did not bring development to the Caribbean – only wealth extraction.

Poor Transportation links for trade

In the post-independence period, Caribbean countries have sought to diversify their economies and their trade, but these efforts have suffered from the need for vital infrastructure, and from the absence of transportation links to markets. For instance, there are no direct transportation links between the Caribbean and Africa, and even direct transportation links to neighbouring Latin American countries are non-existent.

Such transportation links as exist are based on the colonial model in which to get to Africa, Asia or the Pacific, the route is through Britain with all its attendant additional costs, making trade in goods difficult and expensive.

Today, Caribbean countries face chronic problems – among them shortages of productive capital, high structural unemployment, trade and balance of payments deficits and, in many of them, high levels of debt.

Divided Societies

In Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago – two of the larger former British colonies in the Caribbean – their politics and development have suffered from the racial divisions between their two major ethnic groups, Africans transplanted as slaves and East Indians transported as indentured labourers as a bulwark against any bargaining power that freed African slaves might have been able to muster.

Dr Eric Williams, a Historian and former Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, described the reality of independence for these countries as “seeking to deal with our problems on a national scale and in an international context with a mentality conceived in slavery, cradled in indenture and nurtured in colonialism”.³

The racial division – which is a direct result of British colonial policy of divide and rule – continues to frustrate the politics and governance of

³ Eric Williams, “The Reality of Independence”, *The Nation*, Vol.7, No.15, 22 January 1965

these two major countries in the English-Speaking Caribbean and retards their development.

Preserving a fragmented Caribbean

A bad feature of Empire in the Caribbean was the acquiescence of Britain in the plantocracy's determination over 300 years to maintain the region as separate enclaves of influence.

When it was overcome in the late 1950s by the effort of local leaders, it is arguable that the British Government's abandonment of the Federation of the West Indies by offering Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago the opportunity of independence individually in 1962, assured for the future a weak and vulnerable region.

While the British government's action was not the sole contributor to the break-up of the West Indies Federation that lasted from 1958 to 1962, the seeming desire to be shed of its Caribbean colonies resulted in the creation of what is now 12 independent states – many with populations of less than 100,000 and each struggling to survive at various levels as sovereign states, beset with high levels of crime, high rates of unemployment, no economies of scale for production, low rates of technological knowledge, and little capacity to bargain in the international community.

The Ugly

Slavery and Indentured Labour

African slavery and East Indian indentured labour were the mainstay of cheap production of sugar from the Caribbean that contributed for centuries to the wealth, growth and development of Britain.

In 1838, when slavery was abolished by Britain, British slave owners in the English-Speaking Caribbean received £11.6 billion in today's value as compensation for the emancipation of their "property" – 655,780 human beings of African descent that they had enslaved and exploited.

The freed slaves, by comparison, received nothing in recompense for their dehumanisation, their cruel treatment, the abuse of their labour and the plain injustice of their enslavement.

The monies paid to slaves owners have been studied and assembled by a team of Academics from University College London, including Dr Nick Draper, who spent three years pulling together 46,000 records which they launched as an internet database.⁴

The benefits of those monies still exist in Britain today. For example, they are the foundations of Barclays Bank, Lloyds Bank and the Royal Bank of Scotland. But they are also the basis of wealth for many leading British and Scottish families.

Dr Draper is reported as saying of the Hogg family: "To have two Lord Chancellors in Britain in the 20th century bearing the name of a slave-owner from British Guiana (now Guyana), who went penniless to British Guiana, came back a very wealthy man and contributed to the formation of this political dynasty, which incorporated his name into their children in recognition – it seems to me to be an illuminating story and a potent example."

The Hogg family were not unique.

The wealth and political good fortune of 19th Century British Prime Minister William Gladstone had its origins in the £83 million, at today's value, of "compensation" given to his father, John Gladstone, for slaves he owned in British Guiana and Jamaica.

It was the same John Gladstone who introduced East Indian indentured labour in the Caribbean, on his plantation Vreed-en-Hoop in Guyana to counter the capacity of freed slaves to bargain and to keep wages dirt cheap.

But it was not individual families alone that helped to create African slavery and that benefitted from it; it was the British state as whole – its

⁴ The website is: ucl.ac.uk/lbs.

successive governments that provided subsidies for the trade; that adopted legislation that facilitated it; and that were complicit with the governments of their colonies in adopting laws that designated African slaves as “real estate” – people stripped of human identity, including life, and, therefore, to be treated like land, houses and buildings.

Remarkably, it was also the British State, including the British people, who paid “compensation” to the slave owners while completely disregarding any obligation whatsoever to 655,780 people, who were enslaved and cruelly exploited. To do so, the British government borrowed £20 million which is £76 billion, at today’s value, from the Rothschild Banking Empire.

The sum amounted to about 40 per cent of the country’s Gross Domestic Product at the time.

British exploitation of people in the Caribbean did not start, or end, with the enslavement of Africans. For instance, Caribbean economic historian Hilary Beckles records the systematic “elimination” of the Kalinagos – the original people of the Eastern Caribbean islands.⁵ It was the first act of genocide in the Western Hemisphere, and it was executed with the full knowledge and approval of the British authorities.

African slavery was followed in some Caribbean countries – Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago and Suriname in particular - by indentured servitude of people from India bonded to an estate and its owners, deprived of normal liberties, subjected to cruel and inhuman treatment. It was what the respected British historian, Hugh Tinker, described as “another kind of slavery”.

When the vast majority of the original people of the Caribbean were near extinction forcing the brutalised handful who remained into submission; when slavery was abolished with no recompense to the Africans for the deprivation of their liberty, the people of the Caribbean were left destitute, deprived and disadvantaged. In Beckles’ words: “They got

⁵ Hilary McD Beckles, “Britain’s Black Debt: Reparations for Caribbean Slavery and Native Genocide”, University of the West Indies Press, Jamaica, 2013

nothing by way of cash reparations to carry them into freedom. No land grants were provided. No promissory notes were posted”.⁶

The Caribbean would today have been much further along the road of social and economic development if even half of the “compensation” given to slave owners had been given to slavery’s victims 175 years ago.

Several Caribbean governments today argue that there is a compelling case for reparations to the nations of the Caribbean on behalf of the people who were the victims of slavery.

Whatever happens with the campaign for reparations, the fact that African slaves in particular received no compensation for their captivity and enforced exploitation is a stain on its legacy of Empire in the Caribbean, and stands as one of the root causes of the under-development of the region.

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⁶ Ibid