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**The Conception of the West Indies Federation
and the Realities of an Imperial Legacy**

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The short-lived West Indies Federation (1958-1962) represented an attempt by British and West Indian leaders to create an entity that would provide the peoples of the region with a stable economic and political future once they had achieved independence from colonial rule. It provided Britain with an opportunity to relinquish the financial burden of the region while ensuring that it created a favourable view of its more than 300 years of imperial control. One of the central drivers of British policy in the West Indies was to ensure a successful federation, which would cement Britain's imperial legacy in the Caribbean. This was not to be the case. By 1962 the West Indies Federation had collapsed due to arguments around finance and freedom of movement. Its two largest members, Jamaica and Trinidad, had been granted their independence as separate nation states and members of the Commonwealth. The idea of federation, for almost three decades seen as synonymous with achieving independence, had by 1962 become unviable. The aim of this paper is to explore the early motives and actions of Britain and the West Indian islands in their attempt to create a successful federation for the region. It will examine the reasons for advocating federation and analyse British and West Indian political leaders' reactions to it. Their attempts to form a successful union, spirited on by a level of regional camaraderie that would be unrecognisable by 1960, will also be examined. In order to fully understand the motivation behind the advocacy of the federal idea, it is crucial to emphasise the British position immediately after the Second World War.

In 1945, Sir Orme Sargent, Permanent Under Secretary at the Foreign Office wrote that, 'if we cease to regard ourselves as a World Power we shall gradually cease to be one'.¹ The realisation that old-style imperialism was no longer viable after 1945 prompted the British to redefine the way in which they viewed their colonial possessions. The idea of the Commonwealth being Britain's ticket to a unique position in world affairs became increasingly important in Whitehall's thinking. For many, it represented power and influence without the associated cost. As Peter Marshall has written, the idea of the Commonwealth cushioned the heavy blow that the loss of an Empire had on the British psyche.² In order to avoid facing the realities of the post-war world, Britain therefore invested its energies into achieving a new international position as head of a multi-cultural Commonwealth of Nations. With nationalism growing in all of its territories (both formal and informal), Britain believed that it had to ensure a favourable withdrawal from power by leaving its former possessions in a political and economic position of self-sufficiency and the potential for future prosperity.

Forced by these growing nationalisms, the weight of international opinion against colonialism (predominantly from America and India) and its own inability to maintain a costly Empire, Britain began a process by which it could withdraw from the financial responsibility for its colonial territories while ensuring that politically, it retained positive relations with these newly independent territories, as members of the British-led Commonwealth of Nations. It is important to stress that independence in this early period did not mean total independence from Britain. For many of the smaller territories independence meant the ability for full self-government, with a continued link to Britain that the Dominions had enjoyed since the Statute of Westminster in 1932. It would only be towards the middle of the 1950s that the realisation occurred to the British government that only complete independence would be acceptable both to these countries and the United Nations.

In this early period however, Britain believed that a simple redefinition of its relationship with its colonies would enable them to continue on its imperial mission; what the British believed to be benevolence of rule was in keeping with the imperial tradition of enlightened liberal imperialism. Yet what would become an underlying current throughout British and to a lesser extent, West Indian, policy discussions around decolonisation was beginning to develop. If ethical sentiment had been a key British motivation towards its Empire then, morally, it was inextricably linked to providing its former colonial possessions with the

potential for a prosperous future. The moral arguments that concerned British leaders during this period can be interpreted as a desire to conform to their own imperial stereotype. It can be argued therefore that for the British government, the period after 1945 became as much about living up to its own imperial expectations as it was about ensuring that Britain remained competitive in the new post-war world.

For ministers, therefore, there was a period of confusion surrounding the role of Empire: it was unclear whether Britain could maintain its Empire to the level previously expected, whether the Empire could itself help Britain to increase or at least solidify its world position and economic strength or whether it was indeed necessary to relinquish all control of Empire and forge a new association of territories via the Commonwealth with Britain as its nominal leader. This was the overriding background behind all the discussions surrounding the West Indies Federation. Overall, British expectations were no longer commensurate with the country's economic ability to sustain them. Whilst it was hoped that America would assume the imperial mantle from Britain, this hand-over of power was not occurring as fast as anticipated and meant that Britain was overstretched in areas of the globe that had little or no value to it.³

Perhaps sadly for idealists, the realities of decolonisation centred upon one key tenet – relinquishing financial (and therefore political) responsibilities. The aim was to ensure that, however territories came to independence, they would be economically and financially viable, self-sufficient units. Due to the high numbers of small territories that made up the British Empire, London believed that only by combining them into federations would they have any chance at success. This would be a view that would evolve and change throughout the period in question, but it was prevalent in the immediate years following 1945.

The context of the Cold War ensured that Britain had three main aims when constructing federations: financial viability, economic independence and regional security. Ronald Hyam has called federal systems 'a solution for the perennial imperial problem of governing big intractable areas [and] of establishing more viable units to whom power could be safely transferred'.⁴ By 1950, Britain was planning federations in Malaya, Southern Arabia, Central Africa and Nigeria, as well as in the Caribbean. Whilst each had specific, localised reasons for their creation (such as to ensure multi-racialism in Central Africa, and provide indigenous African peoples with a means to prevent domination by white minority rule), the overarching

principle that drove them remained the same. Louis has written that all federal systems had the essential concept that shared wealth would allow overall development of its constituent members.⁵ Britain perceived federations as offering the most efficient method by which to transfer economic and political control to ensure that it had as few lasting official attachments or drains on the Treasury as possible. Informal influence was the crux of imperialism for the latter half of the twentieth century. By ensuring that these federations were a success, it was expected that they would provide regional security against the perceived threat of Communism, look favourably towards the West and make a successful contribution to world affairs as members of the Commonwealth.

However, for all their seemingly moralistic intentions, it is highly debatable whether federations were designed more for the benefit of the British than the colonial peoples for whom they were intended to provide a prosperous future. It is significant that by the end of the 1960s, the West Indies Federation, the Federation of Nigeria and the Central African Federation had all collapsed, with constituent members achieving independence as separate nation states. Does this show the incompatibility of the federal idea to individual situations (British attempts at a 'one-size fits all' approach to decolonisation) or does it emphasise the reluctance of local leaders to embrace an idea that could easily be perceived as Britain attempting to renege on its imperial responsibilities? The British approach to the West Indies Federation in particular raises many issues over London's commitment to the benevolence of the federal-imperial idea, especially in the latter half of the 1950s.

In February 1956, in his opening address to the British Caribbean Federation Conference in London, the Colonial Secretary Lennox-Boyd made clear the aim that the British government had for the West Indies Federation:

Independence means, first, that a country must be able to stand on its own feet financially and economically so that its people have the wherewithal to live a decent life without having to rely on some other country to subsidise them... To be truly independent a State must at the very least be able to finance its own administration, be recognised as financially sound, be able, amongst other things, to raise money on its own credit. Then can it with dignity accept the help of other partners to improve its economic situation and develop its resources to the general advantage of the partnership.⁶

Significantly, this was the first declaration of intent regarding the West Indies Federation by a Colonial Secretary since 1947, when the Montego Bay Conference had been held to discuss the viability of the federal idea in the region. However, the idea of a federation in the British Caribbean was centuries old. Having first been suggested in the mid-1600s, the idea resurfaced on regular occasions throughout the nineteenth century. At one point it was even suggested that Canada should become responsible for the region as part of its own empire. A federation was suggested in a debate in the House of Commons in 1905 and was increasingly advocated as a solution to the region's problems in the 1930s and 1940s.⁷

With increasing demand for greater involvement in the political process by local politicians, Britain had to find a way to grant a larger measure of autonomy without increasing its own financial commitments. Federation seemed the likeliest way to achieve this. Indeed, the financial security of the West Indies was noted by M.P.s in a debate in the House of Commons in the 1940s. Following from the riots of the thirties that had brought the poverty of the region to international attention and had increased the appetite of local leaders to be involved in the political process, the British politician L.D. Gammons stated that due to the small administrations of the individual islands, federation may be the only viable option to 'improve materially the economic conditions in the West Indies'.⁸

What is most interesting about this statement is that it goes to the moral heart of British imperialism. By advocating the creation of a federation as an effective method to financially better the West Indies rather than alleviating any burdens on the British Treasury, it emphasised the altruistic principles that underlay the practical intentions of London that existed in the initial period of federal discussions. It is noticeable that Lennox-Boyd's statement was in marked contrast to the idealistic announcement that heralded the commencement of the debate around federation.

In 1945, the Colonial Secretary, Oliver Stanley, produced an official despatch intended for discussion by Governors of the region that advocated federation for the West Indies. It is significant that in this despatch, he advocated federation in purely political terms, without mention of the financial implications of independence that would become central to British policy soon after 1950. Stanley wrote:

I consider the aim of British policy should be the development of federation in the Caribbean at such time as the balance of opinion in the various colonies is in favour of change and when the development of communications makes it administratively practicable. The ultimate aim of any federation which may be established would be full internal self-government within the Commonwealth.⁹

This despatch would set the tone of the next decade for one of the key drivers for the Federation. By advocating that regional enthusiasm for the federal idea was paramount, it led the British to insist that all federal decisions be taken by West Indian leaders alone, with little or no input from British officials. Were the British justified in their belief that West Indian enthusiasm for the federal idea was sufficient to abdicate responsibility in the decision-making process?

That in itself is difficult to answer and forms the heart of much of the debate around the West Indies Federation. Whilst it would become increasingly clear that Federation was an unworkable solution for the region's islands to achieve their independence, in the initial discussions up to the early 1950s, support for Federation was strong. Indeed, in the early discussions surrounding the federal idea, the West Indian leaders were at their most enthusiastic about it as a means to secure greater self-government. However, the question can be posed as to whether West Indian leaders were enthusiastic towards the idea of Federation because it was favoured by Britain or whether it was because they independently supported it.

The publication of the Wood report in 1922 had been the first official document advocating a greater level of formalised, regional co-operation as means to greater self-government.¹⁰ The argument could be made that once this had been published, the view of regional leaders would be in favour of greater co-operation and they would view a federation as the best method by which they could achieve greater political control. From the 1920s, leaders such as Captain Cipriani in Trinidad, TA Marrayshow in Grenada, Duncan O'Neil in Barbados and Hubert Crichtlow in British Guiana had been powerful advocates of West Indian self-government and universal adult suffrage. Indeed, Cipriani had for many years urged the people of the Caribbean to join together in closer union, using the slogan 'Agitate, Educate, Confederates'.¹¹

In 1932, at a meeting in Dominica, a number of West Indian politicians from Trinidad, Barbados, the Windward and Leeward Islands agreed unanimously on a draft constitution for a federation of nine islands (not including Jamaica and British Guiana but providing them

with the option to join later). They presented this to the Closer Union Commission but were rejected on the grounds that public opinion in the region was not yet sufficient to warrant a federation.¹²

Following the riots of the late 1930s, a Royal Commission was established to investigate the causes of the disturbances. On the subject of Federation, it concluded that ‘the combination into one political entity of all the British possessions in the area is an ideal to which policy should be directed’ and recommended that ‘an attempt should be made to overcome local prejudice against Federation, both by exposition of its theoretical advantages and by testing these in practice through the amalgamation of some of the smaller units’.¹³

The unity created by the events of the Second World War enabled a more cohesive approach to regional nationalism to be taken after 1945. In this year, the Caribbean Labour Congress (CLC) held its annual meeting in Barbados. The CLC represented one of the first attempts at a regional committee of local leaders that could help to bring together the islands of the West Indies in closer association. At the conference, there was much discussion around increasing the level of regional co-operation. Representatives of the Peoples National Party (PNP) of Jamaica read out a letter from their leader, Norman Manley (who was himself unable to attend). In it, he affirmed his party’s belief in closer union and gave ‘a solid assurance of adherence to a West Indian outlook’. He concluded by reiterating the importance of regional unity and the ability of West Indians to put aside their historic differences to work with one another towards the achievement of a shared goal:

I feel certain that the new spirit which is alive in the West Indies today will be strengthened and guided by the results of your work and that a foundation will be laid upon which the national life of each Country may with greater sureness and more speedily be built to the end that we may all by our united efforts achieve the full status to which we aspire.¹⁴

Whilst emphasising Manley’s rhetorical skill, it also highlights his desire to achieve closer union within the region. Indeed, along with Grantley Adams, Manley was one of the most vocal and popular advocates of federation. It was seen as crucial to alleviating the concerns of domination held by the smaller islands that a leading politician from the region’s largest island was a supporter of a fair and equitable federation. Indeed, in contrast to the increasingly measured criticisms he would level at the federal idea following his election as

Jamaica's Chief Minister in 1955, Manley's letter to the CLC conference can be seen as a clear indication of a man who became forced to play politics with his principles. By early 1960, Manley had become embroiled in a political conundrum. From 1955, in order to maintain a strong position within Jamaican politics, he had publically attacked the Federation for the potentially detrimental effect its weak financial position would have on the growing economy of Jamaica. However, once he had called a referendum on Federal membership and in order to ensure that his goal of seeing Jamaica as a key member of The West Indies Federation remained alive, Manley's own political career then lay in the success of an organisation that he had spent much political effort trying to undermine.

Manley's shift in his belief in the idea of greater regional association can be attributed to the necessity to play politics in his native island. Whilst the other central leaders involved in the West Indies Federation debates, such as Williams and Adams, controlled their island politics, Manley found himself in a continued political fight with his cousin and leader of the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP), William Alexander Bustamante. Bustamante would become the chief critic of federation and can be seen as, in some ways, the catalyst that brought about its disintegration. A formidable politician, Bustamante had been elected as his country's first Chief Minister in 1945, beating Manley in the election. He would also, due to his success in the Federal referendum, become his country's first Prime Minister when it achieved independence in 1962. In the early period, however, Bustamante was more in favour of federation than against it. As a supreme political animal, Bustamante held back his support for closer regional association until, it could be argued, he believed the mood of Jamaica favoured the idea. Despite being the founder and president for life of the Bustamante International Trade Union (BITU), the largest trade union in the region, he had neglected to attend the meeting of the CLC in September 1945 due to his scepticism on federation. Not until the Montego Bay Conference in 1947 had reached the first regional agreement supported by the British to move forward with the idea of building a federation, did Bustamante place his support, however tentatively, behind the idea. It was only in the early period of the federal discussions that Manley and Bustamante appeared to believe equally in the concept of federation.¹⁵

At Montego Bay, Bustamante professed that there was no point in Jamaica joining a federation of paupers but that he stood behind the Federation in its search to overcome its initial difficulties. He announced that 'everyone [at Montego Bay] realises that there are

obstacles in the way of our final goal, but that we should be big enough to blast away the obstacles'.¹⁶ Indeed, Bustamante's support was such that he ensured that the proposals of the conference were endorsed by the Jamaican House of Representatives.

Shortly before the Montego Bay Conference, the CLC held a further pre-meeting on regional co-operation at Kingston. The CLC rejected any form of limited federation and called for an immediate start in taking steps to secure federation with internal self-government. At this meeting, Manley was one of the foremost advocates of Federation (as he would remain, at least personally, throughout the period) and he urged, as Sherlock has written, that 'the West Indian problems were outstanding proof of the fact that people could only become a nation under their own leadership and by the power of their own decisions. [Manley] said that while seeking to maintain connections with the Commonwealth it could only be as a people with all the powers to speak and bargain for themselves; and that it was necessary to create out of themselves a unit large enough to satisfy ambitions of the West Indian people and to plan collectively to achieve a sane and balanced economy.'¹⁷

Once again, even in these initial discussions on federation, the incontrovertible power of personality politics is well demonstrated. Whilst some writers have been quick to highlight the deficiencies of West Indian leaders as one of the key reasons that the West Indies Federation collapsed, and others have ardently defended their actions, it is abundantly clear that without their powerful personalities and belief in the federal idea that it would never have been adopted at Montego Bay and never driven through to fruition by 1958.

Yet throughout the early federal debates, culminating in the official agreement to proceed towards the creation of a federation at Montego Bay in 1947, Norman Manley would remain one of the chief advocates of closer association to facilitate greater self-government. In a speech to the PNP annual conference, Manley clearly demonstrated his optimism for the future prospects of the region and his passion for regional co-operation. He addressed issues such as finance and immigration and emphasised his belief that a sense of West Indian nationhood was paramount in achieving successful regional co-operation. He also raised the point that West Indian support for the idea of federation only existed because the British had suggested it first. This notion of West Indians being led to the proposal of a federation is an underlying theme of discussions through the period. Manley himself acknowledged the dangers of being led to an idea rather than being the creator of it: 'The West Indian problems

are a signal example of neglect and administrative incompetence. The West Indian problems are one of the outstanding modern proofs of the fact that no people can become a nation save under their own leadership, and by the power of their councils and decisions.’¹⁸ Manley believed in the importance of an independent federation, which in the early discussions meant attaining dominion status. He emphasised that above all else, the ultimate goal of the West Indies Federation should be independence: ‘I cannot imagine what we should be federating about if it is not to achieve the beginnings of nationhood’.¹⁹

The role played by Adams, the future Prime Minister of the Federation, in the early discussions is one of active participation. His optimistic support for closer union echoed closely the stance taken by Manley. Indeed Adams’ belief in the Federation was such that, in a speech to the Barbados Workers Union in July 1947 he likened the federal experience to that of emancipation: ‘Now that we happen to be so near to federation, I believe it is the greatest event in our life – next to emancipation ... that is going to happen in the West Indies. We have our destiny in our hands and if ... we get the West Indies federated on that basis, our children will have an easy time’.²⁰ This clearly highlights the importance invested by some in the idea of closer union and the belief that Federation was the only way to achieve this.

Yet it is prudent not to exaggerate the level of enthusiasm for federation at this time. Other than the official statements of their leaders, it is difficult to judge the level of interest that ordinary West Indians had for the notion of closer union and regional co-operation. However, if CLR James’ description of West Indians being ‘a bastard feckless conglomeration of individuals inspired by no common purpose, moving to no common end’, is in any way true, then it may be surmised that most ordinary people had no real view on federation in the beginning.²¹ It could be assumed, therefore, that it was a purely political exercise that may have troubled the conversation tables of the intelligentsia of some of the islands but did not take over the national consciousness in any great way. In the early period, much of the ability to enthuse about a federal proposal stemmed from its nebulous nature; nothing had been tied into the regional political realities of the day. As there was nothing for politicians to lose, they could support the principle of federation with impunity. The in-fighting that would come to increasingly dominate federal proceedings throughout the period had not yet manifested itself. There were, however, signs of general scepticism towards the idea beginning to form.

Philip Sherlock has written of his belief that the general success of the Montego Bay conference was linked predominantly to the fact that the leaders were in favour of federation but had more important things to do in their respective islands and had therefore not studied the topic in depth.²² The sweeping rhetoric and grand speeches of the conference, connected as they were with little real discussion of the realities of the proposal, support this view.

Yet it is vital to mention that Bustamante, Manley and Adams, for all their enthusiasm for the federal idea, tempered their reactions with some measure of political realities. Bustamante, in particular, was prominent in his support of Federation on the understanding that it could adequately protect Jamaica's welfare. He pushed at Montego Bay for recognition from Britain that economic support would be forthcoming to ensure that federation was a success, and that Jamaica would not have to shoulder the burden of making it one. At Montego Bay in 1947, Adams noted that Bustamante was foremost a Jamaica 'with little inclination to include the rest of the British West Indies in his plans as a statesman'.²³ This view was considered harsh enough to warrant heated debates between Adams and Bustamante.

The Barbadian Beacon, in its support for federation, heralded a note of caution relating to the nature of West Indian politics at the time. Perceptive in its interpretation of one of the major criticisms levelled at the federation, that the debates surrounding its creation took longer than the total life of the West Indies Federation itself, it highlighted the need to ensure that the Federation was a productive entity, not a 'juvenile home for the loquacious and mentally defective of the political world'.²⁴

Overall however, the importance of this early enthusiasm for federation was crucial in ensuring that the idea became a political reality. Despite being rooted in the principles of federation rather than in the realities of creating such an entity, it would have been viewed with optimism by both West Indian and British leaders as the best way to achieve the independence that both of them desired. To restrict optimism for federation to this early period, though, would be to forget that faith in the federal idea was strong until 1960 and that it was only with the loss of the referendum in Jamaica that would prompt any strong conviction in the Federation's dissolution. As Eric Williams put it, 'any federation is better than no federation.'²⁵

Notes

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- ¹ TNA:PRO FO 371/50912, Memo by Sir Orme Sargent, 11 July 1945.
- ² Peter Marshall, '1918 to the 1960s: Keeping Afloat' in Peter Marshall (ed), *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1996) p. 94.
- ³ Andrew Porter and A.J. Stockwell, *British Imperial Policy and Decolonization, 1938-1963: Volume 2, 1951-64* (London, 1989), p. 7.
- ⁴ Ronald Hyam, 'The Geopolitical Origins of the Central African Federation: Britain, Rhodesia and South Africa, 1948-1953', *The Historical Journal*, Col. 30., No. 1. (March 1987), p. 145.
- ⁵ Wm. Roger Louis, 'The dissolution of the British Empire', in Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis (eds), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: volume IV The Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1999), p. 324.
- ⁶ The National Archives, CAB 134/1203, CA (54), 4, Lennox-Boyd's address to the British Caribbean Federation London Conference, 1 February 1956.
- ⁷ Jesse Harris Proctor, 'Britain's Pro-Federation Policy in the Caribbean: An Inquiry into Motivation', *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, Vol. 22., No. 3. (August, 1956), p. 322.
- ⁸ L.D. Gammons, April 15th 1943, cited in Proctor, 'Britain's Pro-Federation Policy', p. 323.
- ⁹ The National Archives, T220/360, British West Indian Federation: Colonial Office Brief for Ministers, March 1953.
- ¹⁰ Report by the Hon. E.F.L. Wood, M.P., on his visit to the West Indies and British Guiana, December 1921 to February 1922, Cmd. 1679 (London, 1922), pp. 29-32, cited in Elisabeth Wallace, *The British Caribbean: From the Decline of colonialism to the end of Federation* (Toronto, 1977), p. 92.
- ¹¹ Randolph Mitchell, *His Best Orations: A Summary of the activities of Captain A.A. Cipriani* (Trinidad), p. 103., cited in F. A. Hoyos, *Grantley Adams and the Social Revolution: The Story of the movement that changed the pattern of West Indian society* (London, 1974), p. 110.
- ¹² Philip Sherlock, *Norman Manley* (London, 1980), p. 145; Hugh Springer, *Reflections on the failure of the First West Indian Federation* (Harvard, 1962), p. 3.
- ¹³ Springer, *Reflections*, p. 3.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ¹⁵ Sherlock, *Manley*, p. 146; Gordon K. Lewis, *The Growth of the Modern West Indies* (London, 1968), pp. 180-184.
- ¹⁶ Sherlock, *Manley*, p. 147.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- ¹⁸ Rex Nettleford (ed), *Norman Washington Manley and the New Jamaica: Selected speeches and writings 1938-68* (New York, 1971), p. 165.
- ¹⁹ Nettleford, *Norman Manley*, p. 167.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- ²¹ CLR James, *The Case for West Indian self-government* (London, 1933), p. 32., cited in Samuel J. Hurwitz, 'The Federation of the West Indies: A Study in Nationalisms', *The Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 6., No. 1. (November, 1966), p. 141.
- ²² Sherlock, *Manley*, p. 147.
- ²³ *Daily Gleaner*, 12 September 1947, cited in Hoyos, *Grantley Adams*, p. 124.
- ²⁴ *Barbadian Beacon*, 31 May 1947, cited in Hoyos, *Grantley Adams*, pp. 119-20.
- ²⁵ Eric Williams, *Federation, Two Public Lectures* (Trinidad, 1956), p. 12.