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CABINET

BRITISH GUIANAMemorandum by the Secretary of State for the Colonies

My colleagues will recollect that, in April 1953, the People's Progressive Party (P.P.P.) in British Guiana won the first General Election under universal adult suffrage and took office under a new constitution which gave wide powers to elected Ministers. Within six months it was necessary to suspend this constitution to prevent the subversion of Government by the extremist leaders of the Party. A wholly official and nominated Interim Government was set up.

2. The Robertson Commission, appointed to enquire into these events, recommended an indefinite period of marking time in constitutional matters. I announced in November, 1954, that Her Majesty's Government accepted this recommendation but intended to do everything possible to fit the Colony for a return to representative Government.

3. Since the suspension of the constitution, efforts to improve conditions in the Colony and develop its resources have been intensified. Progress so far has not been as good as was hoped but the ground has been prepared for carrying through the major programme of development recently announced for 1956/60.

4. In the political field, the most significant development has been a split in the P.P.P. One faction, led by Dr. Jagan, includes the extreme Communist elements and derives its support mainly from East Indians in the sugar estates and country districts. The other, led by Mr. Burnham, has the support of the African community and is stronger in the Georgetown and urban areas. The Interim Government has not secured for itself any measure of popular support and its members, with few possible exceptions, have no political future. A new political Party, called the National Labour Front and led by Mr. Lionel Luckhoo, the Mayor of Georgetown, has recently been formed and may provide an effective focus for opposition to the extremist wing of the P.P.P. It is, however, too early to be more definite than this.

5. Against this background, the present Governor, Sir Patrick Renison, has since assuming duty last October considered the possibility of resuming constitutional advance and as a first step he has relaxed restrictions on political meetings imposed under the Emergency Powers. As a result, there has been a marked heightening in political interest and considerable speculation about the prospects of elections being held. The Governor is satisfied that he should maintain the initiative and has put forward proposals for a limited and closely safeguarded step toward the restoration of representative Government. His proposals, briefly, are that an elected

element should be introduced into the Legislative Council and that he should appoint a number of elected members to serve on the Executive Council with portfolios. Details of the proposed constitution are shown in the Appendix to this paper.

6. These proposals represent the minimum advance which could possibly be made, if it is to be made at all, and there are safeguards at every point. The Governor believes that if this initiative is taken now it will be possible to hold the position at this level for a further period of years, whereas if the pressure for advance is left unsatisfied much longer the time will come when a much larger initial step will have to be conceded. If these proposals are adopted I would in announcing them make it entirely clear that Her Majesty's Government are no more prepared now than in 1953 to tolerate a Communist state in British Guiana, and that this is a controlled experiment, the success or otherwise of which will depend on the Guianese people and the leaders whom they choose to support.

7. I have discussed this matter very fully with the Governor. There is no question of elections being held before April, 1957, and his intention is to leave the date open to give opportunity for a build up of the new National Labour Front. If this proves successful it will open up the possibility of an effective coalition of anti-Communist forces in which the Burnham faction of the P. P. P. might even join. Nevertheless, the possibility that Dr. Jagan and Mr. Burnham, either in combination or separately, would succeed in winning a majority of elected seats (and possibly all of them) must by no means be discounted. I have discussed particularly with the Governor how the constitution would be worked in that event, since it would obviously be expected that he would offer them appointment to Executive Council. He is confident that the P. P. P. leaders could not again risk provoking a breakdown in the constitution without forfeiting their support in the country and it is likely therefore that they would prove co-operative if appointed to Executive Council. There is evidence suggesting that Dr. Jagan personally (as distinct from the convinced Communists in his group) is anxious to secure some political future for himself and is worried about the possibility of disenfranchisement.

8. There is therefore a reasonable prospect of this experiment providing the basis for further progress in the political field in British Guiana. Provided it is clear that we intend to proceed cautiously with full safeguards against Communist extremism, I do not expect any serious loss of confidence in business circles. At the worst, the constitution could revert to its present form at the discretion of the Governor; and there will be a company of United Kingdom troops in the Colony to safeguard against any disturbance.

9. Constitutional advance must sooner or later be resumed in British Guiana and, whenever this is done, some risk must then be accepted. I am satisfied that the Governor's proposal to retain the initiative and take a small step forward at this stage is wise. A further point in favour of this action is that until the elective system is restored in British Guiana there can be no possibility of the Colony joining the Caribbean Federation, as we all hope it will. I therefore hope that it will be agreed that I should make an announcement in Parliament towards the end of this month.

A. L. -B.

Colonial Office, S.W.1.

17th April, 1956.

APPENDIXPROPOSED AMENDED CONSTITUTION

1. The amended Constitution would be as follows:-

(a) Franchise - Universal Adult Suffrage.

(b) Legislative Council

Speaker

Four officials

Not more than eight Nominated Members

Twelve Elected Members

The Speaker would be nominated by the Governor from outside the Council and would have a casting vote only. The Nominated Members would be appointed by the Governor in his sole discretion. The Governor would consider, in the light of election results, the possibility of appointing only seven Nominated Members, thus providing an elected majority of one. The Governor would have the usual reserve legislative powers.

(c) Executive Council

Governor

Four officials

One nominated Member of Legislative Council

Five Elected Members of Legislative Council.

2. The Governor would retain his present powers to act contrary to the advice of the Executive Council. The Elected Members would be chosen by the Governor in his discretion, but he would endeavour to select those who were the leaders of any Party or coalition which had obtained a majority of seats. They would be given duties for departments of Government as "Members", but the Governor would have discretion to withdraw their portfolios and to remove them from membership of Executive Council.

3. If elected members refused either to take their seats in Legislative Council or to accept appointment to Executive Council the Governor in his discretion would be able to nominate members instead. There would be a special provision enabling the Governor in his discretion to remove from Legislative Council any elected member who in his opinion is working for Communist ends. The amendments to the Constitution will be in such form that if necessary the Governor will be able to revert to the present wholly nominated and official arrangements.