Guyana Politics: The suspension of the British Guiana constitution in 1953
By Winston McGowan - Stabroek News - October 31, 2002

Turning Back the Clock

1953 was one of the most important years in Guyanese history. It witnessed two major developments. One of them was the country's first essentially democratic election, held on April 27 in accordance with the provisions of a new and comparatively advanced constitution recommended by the Waddington Commission of 1950.

This constitution introduced several new features into Guyanese political life, including universal adult suffrage at the age of 21 and a ministerial system. It provided for a two-Chamber legislature, comprising a House of Assembly of three official and 24 elected members and an Executive Council. This Executive Council had 10 members, namely four officials and six of the elected members of the House of Assembly who were granted ministerial powers and responsibilities. In short, the elected ministers had a majority on the Executive Council which was the main instrument of policy.

In the general election held under this constitution the People's Progressive Party (P.P.P.), led by Cheddi Jagan and chaired by Forbes Burnham, secured a decisive victory, winning 51 per cent of the votes cast and 18 of the 24 elected seats. Leading members of the party as a result were elected to all six ministerial posts filled from the House of Assembly. The ministers and their portfolios were as follows:

**Cheddi Jagan** - Agriculture, Forests, Lands and Mines  
**Forbes Burnham** - Education  
**Ashton Chase** - Labour, Industry and Commerce  
**Sidney King** (now Eusi Kwayana) - Communications and Works  
**Joseph Latchmansingh** - Health and Housing  
**Jai Narine Singh** - Local Government and Social Welfare
A few months later in October after the ministers had spent only 133 days in office, the second major development of the year occurred. The British government suspended the new constitution, dismissed the ministers and sent troops to the colony to deal with any popular protest that might occur because of the deposing of the freely elected representatives of the people. It entrusted the administration of the colony to an interim government of approved individuals until a new constitution was devised and another general election held. This interim body administered the colony until 1957.

This was the second occasion that the British government had turned back the political clock of British Guiana because of its disapproval of developments which occurred in the wake of the introduction of a new constitution. The first occasion was twenty-five years before in 1928, when it scrapped a constitution introduced in 1891 which led unexpectedly to a gradual erosion of the political power of the favoured white plantocracy and mercantile class and a transfer of much of this influence increasingly into the hands of the rising black and brown middle class.

This article will focus on the considerations which prompted the British government to suspend the colony's constitution again in 1953.

This decision by the British authorities in London stemmed essentially from two somewhat related factors, namely, their dissatisfaction with, and their fear of, the P.P.P-led government of British Guiana. Their thinking was influenced considerably by three sources - the regular reports of the governor, Alfred Savage, a letter from a visiting British official, Stephen Luke, and correspondence and meetings with the officials of Booker Brothers, the leading British firm in the colony.

The series of reports from Savage in July, August and September 1953 indicated to the Colonial Office "quite clearly that the situation was progressively and rapidly deteriorating" and required firm intervention to check and reverse the apparent decay. In his political report for July Savage noted that "it would clearly be politic to avoid a crisis for as long as possible." Then in a letter dated 27th
August to Sir Thomas Lloyd, a senior official in the Colonial Office, he observed the "P.P.P. members of government are using their position to undermine the government." Furthermore, in his political report for August, the governor stated that "extremist views prevail...probably a deliberate intention to wreck the constitution." Finally, even more disturbing to the Colonial Office were the sentiments he expressed to Lloyd in a letter written on 13th September in which he observed: "I am rapidly coming to the conclusion that unless the opposition elements rouse themselves quickly...we shall have to go back on the new Constitution which would mean use of force." He reiterated this opinion in a telegram four days later in which he stated: "I consider a breakdown in the Constitution is probable in any case within a few weeks... it would almost certainly be accompanied by disorder...forces must be acquired."

The governor's increasingly gloomy picture of the situation in British Guiana was confirmed in a pessimistic report of Stephen Luke who visited British Guiana for a week early in September 1953. Luke in a lengthy letter of 12th September to Philip Rogers, a senior Colonial Office functionary, stated: "The situation is unquestionably most disquieting.... I formed the opinion that the senior officials are completely disheartened and pessimistic; that the public service is approaching demoralization; that the business and commercial community are embittered and frightened; and that there is grave anxiety among responsible and fair-minded people like the Anglican Archbishop. I was told that all private investment has ceased; there is, for instance, unemployment in the building industry because virtually all private building has stopped. As you no doubt know, a run has started on the Government Savings Bank."

At the same time that the Colonial Office was receiving these disturbing reports from Savage and Luke, it was informed by the governor and Booker Brothers of developments in a general strike in the sugar industry. This strike had been called by the still unrecognized Guiana Industrial Workers' Union (G.I.W.U) on 30th August 1953 to secure increased wages for all sugar workers and to enforce its demand for recognition in place of the less militant Man Power Citizens' Association (M.P.C.A.), the union favoured by the Sugar Producers Association.
As this strike developed, news reached London of an attempt to start a general sympathy strike on 22nd September, 1953. This was the final or immediate cause of the decision taken by the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Oliver Lyttleton, on the following day that the constitution of British Guiana should be suspended. The decision was communicated by telegram to Governor Savage in Georgetown on the 24th September, 1953 and was announced publicly by the Colonial Office about two weeks later. In that official public declaration the Colonial Office stated that "Her Majesty's Government has decided that the Constitution of British Guiana must be suspended to prevent Communist subversion of the Government and a dangerous crisis both in public order and economic affairs."

This declaration, which was deliberately contrived to rationalise and justify the drastic action taken by the British government, will be the focus of the second instalment of this article.

This second instalment will continue to focus on the factors which prompted the British government in October 1953 to take the drastic step of suspending the constitution of British Guiana and dismissing the ministers of the People’s Progressive Party (PPP) after only 133 days in office. In general, it can be said that this unexpected action was taken because the British authorities, in both Georgetown and London, were extremely displeased with, and fearful of, the PPP.

The friction between the two parties stemmed partly from the fact that the governor and the other British officials in the colony wrongly assumed and expected that the experienced PPP ministers would be subservient to them, soliciting and following their advice. The PPP government often ignored or rejected their advice on the ground that it was designed to promote white local and metropolitan interests rather than the welfare of the common people of the colony who had returned the party to power in the April 1953 general election.

Cheddi Jagan and the other five PPP ministers, guided by their own independent
thinking, devised policies which the British government often regarded as “blunders” resulting from their lack of experience in government and their attempt to honour “a host of irresponsible election promises.” In addition, all the PPP ministers were believed to possess, as Governor Alfred Savage put it, “a deep bitterness of feeling against Britain, the past administration and against society generally.”

The British government was also annoyed and disturbed because it believed that the PPP was not making a serious effort to work the new and comparatively advanced constitution of 1953 which had granted British Guiana a fair measure of self-government. As Governor Savage complained to the Colonial Office in a dispatch of 13th September, 1953, “In spite of the growing difficulties I persisted in a policy of tolerance, goodwill and cooperation, but it became evident that there was little intention on their part to cooperate with me or the other members of the Executive Council, or, in some cases, with Heads of Departments... As a general rule, they face us in Executive Council with their minds made up as the result of previous discussion ... and it is practically impossible to induce them to accept any reasonable compromise.”

The governor was particularly disturbed by the attitude of the PPP ministers to the white British expatriate officials who occupied most of the senior positions in the civil service. The ministers contended that these officials should be replaced by capable, qualified Guianese to whom priority should be given in all appointments. Their stand caused the governor to accuse the PPP of seeking to undermine and get control of the civil service and of conducting a campaign which made the position of the expatriate officials “virtually impossible.”

The government’s view was endorsed by Sir Stephen Luke, Comptroller of Development and Welfare for the West Indies, who paid an official visit to British Guiana early in September 1953. Luke reported that the “Ministers clearly aim of getting rid of them (the white expatriate officials and civil servants) as quickly as possible and there are signs that they will turn their attention to purging the civil service of those who are not politically acceptable to them”.
These allegations against the PPP were partly a reflection and result of the strong opposition which the party had to the 1953 constitution under which it achieved office. From the outset the party had made an unsuccessful attempt to have the British government amend the constitutional proposals. Among the amendments which it had demanded in vain were the abolition of the largely nominated Upper House or State council, voting at the age of 18 instead of 21, and the removal of the three most senior British officials (the Chief Secretary, the Attorney General and the Financial Secretary and Treasurer) from the House of Assembly and the Executive Council.

Governor Savage was very disturbed by the views which the PPP leaders expressed about the constitution, especially outside the legislature. In his opinion their views were “quite irresponsible ... and have verged on the seditious.”

Savage came slowly to a conclusion the PPP contained an extremist element, led by Cheddi and Janet Jagan and Sidney King, which had a sinister secret plan or agenda. That plan, he believed, was to force the British government to concede full self-government at an early date” by creating disorder and economic chaos” in the country.

The British metropolitan government received similar disturbing allegations about the PPP from officials of Bookers, the leading British capitalist company in the colony. In a September 1953 letter Henry Seaford, a Bookers Shipping executive, expressed deep fears for the future of the company and the colony.

Seaford stated that “what the majority of the Ministers are trying to do is to cause chaos in the Colony, then go to the Colonial Office and say that it is because they have not complete control that these things are happening. The aim is to get rid of all white officials and make life so unpleasant for other Whites that they will get out. Schools are to be taught communism and those Masters that don’t agree will be fired. Can you imagine what this Colony will be like in 5 years’ time if this sort of thing continues? Unless something drastic is done, Bookers will cease to
exist as a large firm in 5 years. I consider that the future of Bookers is at stake.”

Seaford, Savage and the British metropolitan authorities were also disturbed by a general strike in the sugar industry which started on 30th August 1953. This protest was called by the PPP dominated Guiana Industrial Workers Union (GIWU) to secure improved wages and working conditions for all sugar workers and recognition of the union as the bargaining agent for sugar workers instead of the less militant Man Power Citizens’ Association (MPCA) that the planters favoured.

The British government was annoyed and concerned that some of the PPP ministers were “publicly fomenting this strike”, viewing their support as irresponsible behaviour that was causing a depression in the colony’s economy. It became alarmed by the receipt of news of an attempt to start a general sympathy strike in the colony on 22nd September 1953 in support of the sugar workers. It was this news which was the final cause of the decision which the Colonial Office made on the following day to suspend the constitution of British Guiana.

Although the sugar strike ended on 24th September, this decision was not reversed. This was because the British government believed that the suspension of the constitution was necessary above all to forestall what it believed was a plan of the PPP to set up a communist state in British Guiana.

Understandably in this Cold War era the British government was paranoid about communism. The PPP was known as the only Marxist party to win an election in the British Caribbean. It was also known that its leaders imported and distributed Marxist literature in the colony and had visited Eastern European countries to attend conferences. Furthermore, since it won the April 1953 election, it had repealed legislation banning the importation into British Guiana of left-wing literature and had removed the prohibition against certain West Indian labour leaders visiting the country.

Such action helped to convince the governor that the PPP had “communistic aims and intentions” and Sir Stephen Luke that the party was committed to “thorough
going and communist totalitarianism.” The governor also reported that the PPP was contemplating a coup early in October and secession of the colony from the British Empire.

Although these ideas influenced the British authorities, they failed to provide then or subsequently any concrete evidence that the PPP was plotting to subvert the constitution and convert the colony into a communist state. They, however, could easily believe that there was communist subversion because they perceived that the PPP was being increasingly dominated by a group of “communist extremists” led, they believed, by Cheddi and Janet Jagan and Sidney King. They believed that most of the eighteen PPP members in the House of Assembly were supporters of the “extremists” rather than of the “moderate” leaders, among whom they classified Forbes Burnham, Ashton Chase and Jainarine Singh.

In its official public declaration explaining reasons for its drastic action, the Colonial Office stated that “her Majesty’s Government have decided that the constitution of British Guiana must be suspended to prevent Communist subversion of the government and a dangerous crisis both in public order and in economic affairs ... The faction in power has shown by their acts and their speeches that they are prepared to go to any lengths, including violence, to turn British Guiana into a Communist state.”

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- **HOUSE of ASSEMBLY — PARLIAMENT -1953 CONSTITUTION**
- **BRIEF NOTES ON P.P.P. MINISTERS – 1953**


Ashton Chase. - Minister of Labour, Industry and Commerce. Member of the P.P.P. Executive Committee. General Secretary of the British Guiana Labour Union (Mr. Chase relinquished this office while serving as Minister.) African. Age 28.

Sidney King. - Minister of Communications and Works. Assistant Secretary, P.P.P. Primary School Teacher. African. Age 29.

Dr. P. Lachhmansingh. - Minister of Health and Housing. Senior Vice Chairman, P.P.P. President of the Guiana Industrial Workers' Union. Medical practitioner. East Indian. Age 58.