

FJM-14 Trinidad and Tobago
The Race Factor in Trinidad Politics.

Chaconia Inn,
Saddle Road,
Maraval,
Trinidad, W.I.

July 15, 1969.

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,
Executive Director,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
535, Fifth Avenue,
New York, N.Y. 10017,
U.S.A.

Dear Mr. Nolte,

As in Mauritius, recently independent island-state in the Indian Ocean, and in Guyana, independent mini-state on the South American mainland, Trinidad contains Negro and Indian populations which, since independence in 1962, have become politically polarized. The Negroes, representing 43% of the total population, have identified with the People's National Movement and its Negro leader, Dr. Eric Williams. The Indians, representing 38% of the total population of Trinidad, have consistently supported the Democratic Labour Party, now headed by an Indian, Dr. Rudranath Capildeo.

Officially, the composition of both parties is multi-racial; and in fact, there are men of each race in the ranks of both parties. Nevertheless, in the four elections held since 1956, a cleavage has developed in the voting patterns of the two races -- a racial cleavage which has guaranteed the governing P.N.M. a very reliable majority.

The critical question, therefore, is whether Trinidadian democracy will be undermined by the continued existence of voting along racial lines, a pattern which helps (race is not the only reason for the DLP's ignominious condition) maintain one party in permanent power while the other languishes in permanent opposition.

This racial cleavage between the two major populations of Trinidad has historical roots in Negro slavery and Indian indentureship, social roots in education and religious practice.

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These statistics further reflect the economic fact that Negroes are engaged in wage labor in the industries while the Indians have remained on the land and work the agricultural sector of the economy.

Socially, one rarely finds Indians at a creole fete; and conversely, Indian music does not appeal to the calypso-rock oriented creole. They are, in the terms of one Trinidadian, "folk living separately, in communities which tolerate, but do not accept one another".

All this is reflected in the politics of Trinidad. In 1956, the Indian party, the People's Democratic Party, under Hindu leadership, was very badly organized and won only five seats in the Legislature. Following this defeat, this party joined with two others, the Trinidad Labor Party and the Party of Political Progress, to form The Democratic Labor Party. The D.L.P., representing the Indian population, then contested in the 1961 elections. In that year, of the thirty seats contested, the P.N.M. gained two thirds of the seats, the D.L.P. one third. These elections were viewed by the Negro population as an achievement of their own race, personified by Dr. Williams, while the Indians regarded the result as a vital threat to their own interests.

As a result of these fears, opposition view certain government policies as racially motivated. For example, in 1962, there was a possibility that Grenada might become a unitary state with Trinidad and Tobago. The Indians saw this as P.N.M.'s attempt to unite with a population of 90,000 Grenadians who are 90% Negro in order to insure the party's continued success at the polls. Another sore point with the D.L.P. is the voting machine.

The voting machines were introduced by the government in 1961. The Opposition D.L.P., however, saw these complicated devices as an attempt by the P.N.M. to baffle the illiterate Indian population or as a way to control and fix the general elections held that year. The Opposition therefore attacked the machines in terms of cost (an expenditure of six million dollars as compared to the \$250,000 cost of the ballot boxes), efficiency (during the 1961 voting period as many as six machines broke down) and fairness (in tabulating the vote, the government refused to allow a D.L.P. expert, brought in from the United States, to examine the machines)... The result, of course, was a bitter protest and a campaign to have the machines replaced by the ballot box. The issue became so heated that the normally mild Hindu leader of the D.L.P. was impelled to cry out that his followers should begin systematically smashing the machines.

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Negro slavery was a vital feature in the colonization and economic growth of the Caribbean islands. Sugar was the key industry. The two, slavery and sugar, were inexorably linked. "This was so", relates Dr. Williams, "because the establishment of sugar created the demand for labor in the West Indian Islands. That demand was for a constant supply of cheap labor, brown, black or white, with the emphasis on the cheapness of the labor rather than the color of the laborer". Negro slavery, obviously, was the cheapest form of labor that could be found.

After emancipation in 1834, this source of cheap labor "dried up" and alternatives had to be found. For the Negro ex-slave, the price wasn't high enough to return to the cane fields; and he adopted the cities, regardless of the fact that city life was in some ways worse than the rural poverty he had experienced.

Consequently, the planters turned to cheap, white labor from the poorer, European countries; but it wasn't enough. Chinese were brought to the Caribbean on contract; but again not in sufficient numbers to do the job. In the face of economic ruin, the planters turned to the British Government which arranged for Indian labor to be brought to the Caribbean on an indentured basis; and so in 1845, the 'Fatal Razak' arrived in Trinidad from Calcutta with 225 Indian laborers on board. By 1917, when the traffic was stopped, 143,900 Indians had come to Trinidad.

Although the Negro and Indian came to Trinidad for the same reasons, the evolution of the two groups was divergent.

For the Negro, slavery was for life. For the Indian, indentured service meant that there was a time limit on his labor, usually five years. The Negro was brought to the Caribbean with no hope of returning to his homeland. The Indian had the opportunity, if he so desired, to return to India following his indentureship. Cut off from his culture, his heritage and from the stabilization of family life (which he was denied), the Negro had to adapt himself to the creole culture of his master. The Indian, on the other hand, maintained his language, his customs, his Hindu or Muslim religion and his close-knit family structure.

Today the Negroes live predominately in the larger cities of Trinidad, while the bulk of the Indian population live in the central portion of the country, around the sugar estates. In the rural, county of Caroni, for example, there are 63,260 Indians and 18,804 Negroes according to the most recent census. In Port of Spain, the Capital of Trinidad, there are 54,263 Negroes and only 8,439 Indians.



Symbolic State of the Nation: Empty chairs of the Opposition in House debate which DLP rejects. Eric Williams continues to read and rule



DLP(acting) Political
Leader, Vernon Jamadar



DLP Party Chairman
Alloy Lequay, MP.

Both seek to revamp an ailing DLP
with new leadership and better programmes

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The leader of the Opposition D.L.P. is Dr. Rudranath Capildeo; and pending a very strong movement to oust him as leader, he remains in official control of the party. Capildeo, one of eleven children born of well-placed, Hindu parents, was an island scholar who studied in England during the second world war. He became a distinguished physicist, mathematician and even completed a degree in law.

In order to match the PNM's Doctor Williams, the Indian population convinced the complex Doctor Capildeo to be the spokesman for the Opposition. He accepted with much integrity, however ineptly. He has spent most of his time, apart from the elections, in London where he has done research and undergone medical treatment for a series of physical and "spiritual" breakdowns.

These breakdowns have deeply affected Capildeo, so much so that he has sought the assistance of many spiritualists, healers and mediums. One such practitioner, an English woman by the name of Mrs. Collins, accompanied the Doctor to Trinidad and assisted him through the 1966 elections. Her method consisted of laying her hands on the subject's head, at which time "the hands would become icy or hot". Because of his beliefs, Capildeo was the object of a favourite, Trinidadian practice -- picong or heckling. He became known as the "Mad Scientist".

Capildeo has taken a two year leave of absence from Trinidad to continue his research, leaving Vernon Jamadar, a D.L.P. representative to act as political leader of the Opposition. However, Jamadar now heads a group to replace the Doctor as the party's leader and naturally a rupture in the ranks of the D.L.P. has resulted.

So the Indian people of Trinidad are now represented by a splintered party, headed by what Mrs. Lilas Wight, MP from Pointe-a-Pierre and a D.L.P. representative, described as "absentee leadership"; a party Hiralal Bajnath, Assistant General Secretary, says "is wholly disorganized".

It is a sad spectacle, since man for man, the D.L.P. representatives are honest and hard-working individuals. I have met the majority of them and was struck by their earnest desire to reform and offer the P.N.M. a much needed challenge.

Yet, in fact, the D.L.P. offers the country no real alternative. Capildeo announced one day, some time ago, that the party was dedicated to "democratic socialism"; but no one has ever clarified what that means, nor outlined a programme which is very different from the one the P.N.M. has offered. As Parliamentarians, the D.L.P. representatives have been reduced to attacking Williams for lack of efficiency, corruption and favouritism.

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Organizationally, the D.L.P. is in shambles and ideologically, they are bankrupt. In fact, it seems to be in Williams' interest to have an Opposition such as the D.L.P. which retains the image of a two-party system but is in reality a one-party show -- with Eric Williams center-stage.

In fact, it was Eric Williams who put the problem of the Opposition succinctly and openly in a debate over the government's third, Five Year Plan:

"The contributions of the Opposition reflect their own internal strain; and it is a shame, even regrettable, that the national interest has to be frustrated because of the difficulties on the other side. Perhaps, after all, it is not too bad that people do not take them seriously".

The question of a multi-racial party arises out of the circumstances. However, the last time a multi-racial party offered its candidates to the voters, it was crushed between the two ethnic parties; not a single contestant gained a seat.

What then are the alternatives to the present political situation in Trinidad? Some come from the labor unions, some from the University of the West Indies; others from "youth power" and still others from "black power". Some are serious and others are ephemeral. I think the most significant come from a Trinidadian economist. His name is Lloyd Best and he is building Tapia Houses.

Some of these alternatives and the particular "option" proposed by Lloyd Best will be outlined in FJM-15.

Yours,

Frank M. McDonald
Frank McDonald.

Received in New York on July 25, 1969.