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“PA’S PENSION”: THE ORIGINS OF  
NON-CONTRIBUTORY OLD-AGE  
PENSIONS IN LATE COLONIAL  
BARBADOS

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# “Pa’s pension”: The Origins of Non-Contributory Old-Age Pensions in late Colonial Barbados<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*In 1937-38, the British colony of Barbados in the south-east Caribbean introduced old-age pensions for the poor. This occurred without much comment from scholars at the time, and has attracted no subsequent attention. But it was an exceptional reform. Not only was it the first country or colony in the world to introduce pensions for elderly people not of European origin, but its lead was followed by only a small number of other territories in the following five decades. This radical innovation occurred in Barbados as part of a slow movement towards social (as well as political) reform, driven by a combination of reformist colonial officials and an emergent black political leadership against the opposition of the conservative white planter and merchant elite. The need for reform was deep poverty in an economy dominated by the sugar industry: the open economy made it difficult to redress poverty through wages and employment-related benefits, and patterns of land ownership made it difficult to redress poverty through the promotion of peasant agriculture. Social policy reform predated the outbreak of riots in 1937, but riots certainly strengthened the reformist coalition and weakened conservative opposition. Tax-financed social reforms provided a compromise solution to the partial amelioration, but not the prevention, of poverty. Together with labour and political reforms, they made possible a weak form of ‘welfare capitalism’ in the face of a potentially deepening radical challenge.*

## Introduction

‘Ma’ and ‘Pa’ are important characters in George Lamming’s classic semi-autobiographical novel, *In the Castle of my Skin*, published in 1953 and set in the eastern Caribbean island of Barbados in the immediately preceding decades.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Meredith Startz for invaluable research assistance in New Haven, to George Lamming for much advice at the Atlantis Hotel, and to Woodville Marshall for his assistance in Bridgetown.

Ma and Pa, like most Barbadians of their time, live in their own house – built with money he had made as a migrant working on the Panama Canal – but on land rented from the white plantation-owner. Now elderly, Ma and Pa spend most of the day sitting, smoking clay pipes and talking, watching the world go past their window and door. Every morning Ma goes out to buy food, whilst Pa feeds the pigeons and goats. ‘Once a week, on Saturdays, the old man went to town to collect their pensions which amounted to a few shillings a week’ (Lamming, 1953: 72).

The story of Ma and Pa is one prism through which Lamming relates the processes of social, economic and political change that were transforming Barbados during his adolescence in the 1930s and 1940s. The novel opens at a time when the Barbadian countryside is much the same as it has been for the century since the abolition of slavery. The white plantation-owner lives in his grand house on top of the hill; down below is the poor but close-knit community of black workers, descended from slaves; the economy remains agricultural, and the racial division of society clear. At the end of the novel, the white landowner sells part of his estate to a newly-successful black businessman and politician, who in turn sells prime sites to other members of the new black middle class whose high salaries permit the move from tenancy to land-ownership. The site where Pa lives – alone, after Ma’s death – is bought by the local school principal. The novel closes with the principal evicting Pa. Apparently without kin or community to whom he can turn, Pa is headed for the dreaded almshouse.

Somewhat similar processes of social change were occurring across much of the colonial world. What was very unusual, however, was Pa’s weekly collection of an old-age pension. Pa was collecting a cash old-age pension that did not depend on his having made contributions during his prior working-life.<sup>2</sup> Barbados was the first colony to introduce, in 1937-38, non-contributory old-age pensions for poor elderly people. Whilst several other British colonies followed its lead, notably Trinidad and Tobago (1939), British Guiana (1944) and Mauritius (1950), the group of colonies or post-colonial countries with non-contributory old-age pensions remained very small until the end of the Twentieth Century.<sup>3</sup>

Non-contributory welfare programmes have been much less common in the global South or ‘developing’ world than contributory programmes entailing

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that Lamming projects Pa’s and Ma’s pensions further back, historically, than is accurate. He describes Pa collecting the weekly pensions *prior* to the riot of 1937, whereas the pensions were first paid out in mid-1938. Lamming, who was about ten years old in 1937, presumably recalls elderly people collecting pensions thereafter and imagined that this had been going on for longer than was, in fact, the case.

<sup>3</sup> The other notable case was South Africa, where in 1944 pensions were extended to the poor, i.e. to people classified as African. See Seekings (2005).

either social insurance schemes or provident funds. Contributory programmes rarely provide for the poorest half of the population, because they are limited to people whose prior working lives were spent in regular, formal employment, whereas most poor people are either peasants or work in the informal economy or experience protracted periods of unemployment and therefore never make the contributions that render them eligible for benefits later. Contributory programmes entail some pooling of risk and for smoothing of income across life-cycles, but they are rarely redistributive from rich to poor (and may even be redistributive from poor to rich, depending on how programmes are funded). Public welfare programmes need to be fully or substantially non-contributory if they are to benefit the poor. This makes the case of Barbados especially interesting, because it was explicitly aimed at helping the poor, i.e. people like Pa and Ma in Lamming's novel.

Elsewhere in the world, the introduction of non-contributory old-age pensions in place of earlier poor relief was driven by a combination of social, economic and especially political change. Social and economic change generated growing numbers of poor people anxious about their future incomes; franchise reform meant that more and more of these people were voters. Conservatives sometimes had their own reasons for replacing poor relief, but both authoritarian and democratic regimes generally preferred to co-opt key segments of the working class through contributory pension schemes. The major impetus for non-contributory pensions came from parties competing for the votes of the poor, i.e. the newly-formed 'labour' parties and those older liberal parties that had shifted toward the more interventionist tenets of the 'New Liberalism'. Non-contributory pensions were introduced in New Zealand in 1898, in the various states in Australia from 1900, and in Britain (and Ireland) in 1909, under its 1908 Old Age Pensions Act (Thane, 1996; Macnicol, 1998). In Uruguay, electoral factors were also important in the introduction of non-contributory old-age pensions in 1919, with the Blanco and Colorado parties competing for the votes of the immigrant working-class in Montevideo (Porzecanski, 1978). In South Africa, the introduction of old-age pensions in 1927-28 for white and 'coloured' people similarly resulted from partisan competition for the votes of 'poor whites' and coloured people, although this was combined with a racist project among sections of the white elite to re-establish a racial hierarchy in which even 'poor whites' were raised above the African population (who were excluded from the new pension system (Seekings, 2006)). The USA was a laggard in the payment of old-age pensions. It had provided generous pensions for veterans of its Civil War, as well as their widows and orphans, but only introduced general non-contributory (as well as contributory) pension schemes in the 1930s, first in individual states and then (in 1935) across the USA, in response to the Great Depression.

Barbados was the first case of a colony where old-age pensions were provided for poor people who not only did *not* have the vote but also were definitely *not* of European origin. Non-contributory, means-tested old-age pensions were introduced in Barbados under its 1937 Old Age Pensions Act, and were paid from May 1938. This paper examines why Barbados came to introduce these pensions in the late 1930s. The agents of this innovation comprised an uneasy coalition of reformist colonial officials, liberal white Barbadians and – perhaps especially – an emerging black Barbadian political leadership. The context was deep poverty in an economy overwhelmingly dominated by sugar plantations and without land for the significant development of smallholder or peasant agriculture. Although the old-age pensions initiative predated the riots in Barbados in late July 1937, the riots did serve to negate the possibility of opposition from conservative white planters and merchants.

Barbadian historians appear to have largely overlooked the introduction of old-age pensions, mentioning it only in passing. Grantley Adams, who dominated Barbadian politics in the 1940s and 1950s, is credited in passing by one scholar with fighting ‘tooth and nail against the planter and merchant conservatives in the Barbados House of Assembly and Legislative Council in order to secure old age pensions and other reform measures for the masses of the colony’ (De V. Phillips in Howe and Marshall, 2001: 173). But no evidence is presented for this assertion, and Adams’ own biographer does not mention him playing a role in old-age pensions (Hoyos, 1974). Most Barbadian historians are critical of Adams’ political opportunism, and have increasingly emphasised the roles of the more consistently progressive or radical leaders whom Adams came to overshadow: men like Dr Charles Duncan O’Neale, the founder of the Democratic League in 1924, who reportedly called for old-age pensions (Hunte, 1966),<sup>4</sup> or Clement Payne, the Garveyite militant who began to organise unskilled workers in early 1937, prompting persecution by the colonial authorities which in turn precipitated riots in July 1937. The 1937 riots, indeed, are widely seen as the starting-point of political and social change in Barbados (see, especially, Beckles, 2004). But, as we shall see below, plans for old-age pensions were already well advanced *before* July 1937. Whilst Barbadian historians are right to emphasise the general importance of popular struggle and militant leadership in the 1930s, they tend to underestimate the growth of support for social and political reform among colonial officials and a reformist minority of white Barbadians.

Nor do old-age pensions in Barbados receive much attention in studies of changing colonial policy, notwithstanding the acknowledged importance of events in Barbados and elsewhere in the British West Indies in prompting an Empire-wide shift towards new policies on ‘development and welfare’. In 1938,

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<sup>4</sup> Hunte does not refer to old-age pensions in a longer study of O’Neale (Hunte, 2001).

a Royal Commission was appointed to examine the causes and implications of a series of riots in 1935-38 (including in Barbados). The Commission, chaired by Lord Moyne, recommended that Britain invest heavily in promoting development and running social services in its West Indian colonies. The Moyne Commission's recommendations were reflected in the 1940 and 1945 Colonial and Development Welfare Acts, and in the appointment of development and social welfare officers not only in the Caribbean but across Africa and other parts of the Empire also. In a series of articles, Johnson argued that the impetus for reform *predated* the Moyne Commission; indeed, that the Moyne Commission served as a vehicle to legitimate a shift in policy which the Colonial Office in London had already embraced. Johnson argues that it was the riots themselves, and the local Commissions of Enquiry into them in 1937 in Barbados (the Deane Commission) and Trinidad and Tobago (the Forster Commission), and not the Moyne Commission, that prompted the actual shift in policy (Johnson, 1977, 1978, 1999).<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately Johnson does not take into account the introduction of old-age pensions in Barbados. Doing so suggests a reinterpretation of his argument. The Deane Commission into the 1937 riots in Barbados, and the riots themselves, did not signal the beginning of the process of change in colonial policy on 'development and welfare'. The process of change stemmed from the political, social and economic conditions in Barbados in the mid-1930s, conditions that resulted in *both* policy reforms *and* popular protest. Moreover, these policy reforms resulted from local as much as, if not more than, metropolitan initiative. The Barbadian case suggests, further, that the Moyne Commission did have real effects, but that the effects were to change the direction and character of social policy reform rather than to stimulate it; it actually helped to *discourage* the replication of the Barbados old-age pension programme elsewhere.

## Politics and Society in late colonial Barbados

Barbados, on the south-eastern periphery of the Caribbean, is a small island merely 21 miles long and, at its broadest, 14 miles across. But, even in the 1930s, almost 190,000 people were crowded onto its 166 square miles. Most of the island was given over to sugar cane plantations. Of the total of 68,000 acres of arable land, 52,000 were divided between the several hundred plantations; smallholdings, almost all of less than one acre, made up the remaining quarter. Society comprised a small white minority who owned the plantations and ran business and administration, and a large and mostly poor coloured or black

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<sup>5</sup> Parts of Johnson's argument were anticipated by Thomas Simey, the first Social Welfare Advisor appointed in 1941 to develop social welfare schemes to be funded under the Colonial and Development Welfare Act (see Simey, 1946).

majority, mostly working in the cane fields. Official sources reported that 7 percent of the population were white, 71 percent were black and 22 percent were 'mixed' (*Annual Report of the Social and Economic Progress of the People of Barbados*, 1939, pp: 2, 7, 12 (henceforth *Annual Report*)).

Incomes in Barbados were very unequal. It is unclear precisely what income the big sugar planters merchants earned in profit, but the distribution of salaries, pensions and wages is revealing on its own. In 1937-38, the Governor was paid £2,500 p.a. (which was tax exempt, and supplemented by an additional £500 entertainment allowance). The Colonial Secretary was paid £1000 p.a., and most judges £500. Retired civil servants were paid generous pensions. For example, Sir John Hutson, a member of the Legislative Council, received a pension of £374 p.a. as a retired Poor Law and Medical Inspector. A total of £33,000 was paid out in pensions to former civil servants (*Barbados Blue Book*, 1937-38). At the other end of society, adult male labourers on the sugar estates were paid between 1 and 2 shillings per day; in the very unlikely event of being fully-employed all year they would earn about £20. Women and children were paid less. Domestic servants were paid much the same as estate labourers. Artisans were paid perhaps twice this much. The salary for government clerks started at about £50 p.a., and for police constables at about £70 p.a. (*Annual Report*, 1937: 15-17).<sup>6</sup> Inequality was obvious to contemporary observers. One wrote that the distribution of wealth enabled 'the members of one class to change their motor cars more frequently than the members of another can change their rags' (Bernard, 1934: 10). In 1935, the historian W.M. Macmillan had visited the West Indies, and famously concluded that 'a social and economic study of the West Indies is ... necessarily a study of poverty' (Macmillan, 1935: 37). One measure of poverty in Barbados was its very high child mortality rate. Given that most white Barbadians were rich, and most black Barbadians poor, it is unsurprising that there was a sharp racial edge to Barbadian society. Overt racial discrimination by some white Barbadians against black members of the middle class intensified racial tensions. Macmillan noted that Barbados was 'the most exclusive and colour-conscious' of the West Indies (*ibid*: 55).

Politically, Barbados had representative institutions but not full responsible government, reflecting its long history as an island settled in the 1620s ('Little England') at much the same time as the east coast of North America (New England). Indeed, the Barbadian House of Assembly was the third oldest in the British Empire, after the House of Commons in London itself and the Bermudan legislature. The legislature comprised a Legislative Council and an elected House of Assembly. The former comprised nine members who served 'at His Majesty's pleasure', which meant in practice that they were appointed by the

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<sup>6</sup> See also much of the testimony at the hearings of the Deane Commission (Barbados Department of Archives, henceforth BDA, S.Ref J.L.628).



Crown for life. The latter had twenty-four members, with two members elected from each of the island's twelve districts (i.e. the eleven parishes and the City of Bridgetown). Under 1901 legislation, the franchise for the House of Assembly was limited to men with substantial incomes or property or with university degrees. In the late 1930s, fewer than 7,000 men had the vote, i.e. about 10 percent of the adult male population (*Annual Report*, 1936-37: 5-6).<sup>7</sup> The executive was headed by a Governor appointed from London. The Legislative Council and House of Assembly together had little say over appointments in the executive, but controlled legislation (subject to the Governor's veto) and had to approve government expenditures – of about £500,000 p.a. – down to minute detail. The largest single categories of expenditure were education, police and prisons, and medical departments. Large sums were also spent on pensions to retired civil servants. Most government revenue came from customs and excise duties, with less than one-tenth coming from income tax on the island (*Barbados Blue Book*, various years).

Local government retained some power and responsibility. In each parish there was an elected Vestry, with the local franchise limited to ratepayers, i.e. it was more restrictive than the House of Assembly franchise. The Vestries were empowered, under 1911 legislation, 'to lay rates for the repair and maintenance of the Churches, the salaries of Church Officers; the maintenance and education of the poor; and such other parochial purposes as are allowed by law'. The eleven Vestries had total revenues of about £100,000 p.a., but the Vestry of St Michael alone (including Bridgetown) accounted for about one-half of this. A large part of this was spent on 'indoor' and 'outdoor' poor law relief, i.e. maintaining residential almshouses for the poor and providing small discretionary grants (in cash or in kind) to the poor living in their own homes (*Barbados Blue Book*, 1937-38).

By the late 1930s, the conservative planter and merchant elite had lost much of its political power (but not its economic power). The number of people satisfying the House of Assembly franchise qualifications was growing steadily, by about 30 percent between 1933 and 1938 alone (*Barbados Blue Book*, 1933-34, 1937-38). By the late 1930s, perhaps as many as one-third of the voters were coloured or black, including professionals, small businessmen and even the most successful artisans. This growth was concentrated in, but not confined to, Bridgetown and the surrounding parish of St Michael. In 1924, a black candidate, 'Chrissie' Braithwaite of the Democratic League, was elected for St

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<sup>7</sup> Voters had two votes, and could vote once for two candidates or use both votes for one. Until the rise of the black middle class, few elections for the House of Assembly were contested. Districts were of very unequal size, in terms of the numbers of voters.

Michael.<sup>8</sup> In 1930, he was joined in the House of Assembly by several other progressive black leaders. O’Neale himself was elected in 1932, and Adams in 1934. In addition, more progressive white representatives were elected to the House of Assembly, tilting the balance of power away from the conservative planters, although the latter continued to control elections in some of the rural districts.

Barbados’ black political leaders espoused varied ideological positions. O’Neale himself was ideologically close to Keir Hardie and the ‘labourism’ of the British Labour Party (Hunte, 2001).<sup>9</sup> The Democratic League, formed by O’Neale in 1924, provided a loose home also to non-socialist progressives, such as (prior to his appointment as a magistrate) Erskine Ward. In 1925, Ward described the gospel of the Democratic League as ‘based on the broad foundations of the Rights of Man’, referring presumably to Tom Paine’s classic *Rights of Man*.<sup>10</sup> Adams stood resolutely apart from the Democratic League, defining himself until the late 1930s as an anti-socialist Asquithean liberal, a position which ‘in the colonial context for a black professional stood just short of being reactionary’ (Beckles, 2001: 224). By the mid-1930s, the Democratic League was in some disarray: organisation was weak, the elderly O’Neale was unable to provide clear leadership, and Braithwaite and others appeared unable to step into his shoes. But the racialised social context encouraged black middle-class politicians to identify with poor black non-voters, and to see their political future lying in pro-poor political, social and economic reforms.

The old conservative elite had more power in the Legislative Council, which included planters appointed in preceding decades. On several occasions the Legislative Council blocked reforms that had passed through the House of Assembly. In the Legislative Council, Dr John Hutson was often a solitary voice for reform. As a former Poor Law Inspector and later Public Health Inspector, Hutson had a good understanding of the extent of malnutrition and poverty on the island.

In August 1933, a reformist and high-flying official in the Colonial Service, Sir Mark Aitchison Young, was appointed as Governor.<sup>11</sup> Immediately, as we shall

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<sup>8</sup> Braithwaite was not the first black Barbadian elected to the House of Assembly, Samuel Jackman Prescod having been elected in 1843 (see Belle, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Beckles describes O’Neale as ‘a respectable Fabian social democrat’, but this probably underestimates his pre-Fabian, labourist beliefs (Beckles, 2001: 224).

<sup>10</sup> Ward, in the *Barbados Herald*, 28<sup>th</sup> March, 1925, cited in Hoyos (1974: 25). Macmillan wrote of black politicians in the West Indies in general that ‘even some who would profess Socialism are at most old-fashioned Radicals’ (Macmillan, 1935: 56-7).

<sup>11</sup> Young had been born in India in 1886, was educated at Eton and Cambridge, and had served in the Colonial Service in Ceylon, Sierra Leone, Palestine and in the Colonial Office in London before his appointment to Barbados. He was a high-flyer in the Colonial Service,

see further below, he embarked on a series of reforms, and used his power over appointments to strengthened the reformist lobby. In 1936, for example, he appointed the reformist white Barbadian, Keith Walcott, as Attorney-General, a position of importance in the House of Assembly, and the following year he appointed as judge Erskine Ward who, before becoming a magistrate, had been a member of the Democratic League and one of the first black members of the House of Assembly. The conservative planters and merchants were thus squeezed between growing political pressure from black Barbadians and a reformist Governor and his liberal white Barbadian allies.

## The Introduction of Old Age Pensions

Since 1880, the poor in Barbados had been the responsibility of the Vestries, who administered poor relief along the lines of the nineteenth century British poor law. The Vestries administered outdoor and indoor poor relief, as well as providing some medical relief. As in Britain, outdoor poor relief was discretionary, parsimonious, and often stigmatising. The almshouses, accommodating people dying from tuberculosis, lepers, the blind and the destitute, were regarded as places of ‘human degradation’; ‘the almshouse wasn’t the kind of residence one admitted’ (Lamming, 2004: 244-5, 294). In 1930, the Vestries spent a total of almost £40,000 on poor and medical relief, with most of this going to the almshouses (£21,000) and personnel costs, and only very small sums going to outdoor relief (£7,000) or medical relief (£3,000) (Carter, 1985a: 38, 1985b). During 1937-38, as many as 1,000 poor people received ‘indoor’ poor relief in almshouses, whilst as many as 22,000 people – perhaps 15 percent of the population – received some outdoor relief (*Barbados Blue Book*, 1937-38, 1938-39). Many poor people were members of friendly societies which provided assistance in times of sickness and also for funeral expenses,<sup>12</sup> and growing numbers of people had small accounts in savings banks.<sup>13</sup> Civil servants were provided with generous pensions from 1925. But, for the most part, poor elderly people relied on kin or community, which was a problem in an economy characterised by low wages and rising unemployment.

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being appointed Governor of Tanganyika in 1938 and Hong Kong in 1941. See *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, vol.60 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> It is likely that in Barbados, as earlier in Britain, Friendly Societies paid pensions to some elderly people on the grounds of their infirmity. At the end of 1937 there were about 190 registered Friendly Societies, with a total membership of 54,500, and total deposits during the year of £31,292 (*Barbados Blue Book*, 1937-38, p.491). Evidence was presented to the Deane Commission on the Barbados Mutual Benefit Society and the Workmen’s Relief Fund run at the Central Foundry in Bridgetown (Deane Commission hearings, 20<sup>th</sup> August 1937).

<sup>13</sup> The Savings Bank had 16,160 depositors, with a total of £1 million in invested funds (*ibid*).

Just as the Barbadian system of poor relief had been modeled on the nineteenth century British system, so the British model of old-age pensions provided an obvious possible model for Barbados. Old-age pensions had been introduced in Britain in 1908-09 by the Liberal Party government, led by Asquith, in the face of sustained pressure from trade unions and the new Labour Party. The British pension scheme was parsimonious, initially paying pensions that were both meager and means-tested, and only from the age of seventy. Subsequently, benefits had been raised (to 10 shillings per week) and the means test abolished. A reformist Conservative Party government had introduced a contributory pension scheme providing pensions from the age of 65. By the mid-1930s, however, there was renewed pressure for more generous old-age pensions (Thane, 1996; Macnicol, 1998).

The first proposal regarding old-age pensions in Barbados in the mid-1930s appears to have been made by a retired Methodist minister, the Rev. Francis Godson, in articles in the Barbados *Advocate* in early 1936. The proposal is said to have attracted ‘the interest and support’ of Governor Young (Carter, 1985a: 17). Godson had first come to the West Indies in 1890, and had been in Barbados for almost all of the time since 1909, much of the time in the poorer north of the island. On a series of occasions – including the late 1910s and mid-1920s – he had appealed through the *Advocate* for assistance for the poor, whom he had come to know well.<sup>14</sup> Godson was clearly regarded highly by the Governor, who appointed him as an acting member of the Legislative Council in April 1937, standing in for Hutson for six months when Hutson was on leave off the island.

The proposal for old-age pensions was rapidly taken up by the government. In mid-1936, Braithwaite asked in the House of Assembly about the ‘advisability of instituting an old-age pension scheme’ and of the appointment of ‘a Committee to investigate the possibilities of such a scheme’ (*Barbados Official Gazette (Hansard)*, 1936: 487). In reply, the Attorney-General – on behalf of the Governor – said that a committee was being appointed to consider both issues (*Ibid*, 1936: 546). In August, the Governor appointed a nine-man committee ‘to examine and to make recommendations on the question of introducing in Barbados a scheme of old age pensions’.<sup>15</sup> The Committee was chaired by Walcott, and four other members of the House of Assembly served

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<sup>14</sup> Godson’s evidence to the Deane Commission, 26<sup>th</sup> August 1937. Godson was born in 1864 in the UK and died on Barbados in 1953.

<sup>15</sup> The Committee’s terms of reference included also examining unemployment insurance. This may have been a response to a question asked by Adams, at the same time as Braithwaite, on 30<sup>th</sup> June. But neither Adams nor any other member of the legislature showed any further interest in unemployment insurance for the moment, and the Committee appears to have disregarded entirely this part of its terms of reference.

on the Committee: two coloured members, Braithwaite and Adams, and two members from major planter families, H.Alleyne, jnr, and G.D.L.Pile. Two members of the Legislative Council were appointed to the Committee: Hutson and Dudley Leacock, a wealthy merchant. The remaining two members of the Committee were Godson and a Mr D.L. Johnson. The appointments of Walcott, Braithwaite, Adams, Hutson and Godson gave the committee a clear progressive majority.<sup>16</sup>

In its Report, in November 1936, the Committee recommended that old-age pensions be introduced, with benefits set at 2/6 (i.e. two shillings and sixpence) per week for men and women from the age of seventy who had been resident in Barbados for the preceding twenty years. The pensions should be means-tested, and paid weekly. Applications should be made to newly-appointed Pensions Enquiry Officers, and would be considered by a dedicated Claims Committee in each parish. The report included as appendices estimates of the likely cost made by Hutson and A.D.V.Chase (the secretary of the Poor Law Board), although they emphasised that they were guessing the probable number of claimants given that the last census had been conducted as long ago as 1921. The proposals were based on the British Old Age Pensions Act of 1908. The Committee was explicit in stating that the purpose was to replace the existing system of outdoor poor relief and almshouses for the elderly.

Godson submitted a somewhat puzzling minority report. He was critical of the administrative expense of the proposed pension scheme, weekly payments, and the focus on the elderly because (he said) the invalid and disabled were often more in need than the elderly. But it is a little unclear precisely what Godson was advocating instead. He seems to have been advocating an expansion of poor relief, but he also suggested that Barbados might follow the 'Trinidad plan, under which the poor person can claim as a right the monthly allowance of 10/- [10 shillings] instead of going to the House of Rest [almshouse]. That is to say, it is not charity but a part of the rights of citizenship' (*Report of the Committee Appointed to Consider and Report on the Question of Introducing a Scheme of Old-Age Pensions in Barbados*, p.12 ).

Opening the new session of the Barbados legislature in January 1937, the Governor described the old age pensions enquiry as 'perhaps the most important enquiry undertaken' during the previous year. A Bill was being prepared, he said, but it would provide for a more modest pension than the Committee had proposed. The pension would be introduced 'on what may be described as a minimum scale, that is to say, on a scale which, while it may provide appreciable relief to the aged poor, is markedly less than the scale which would be prompted by motives of philanthropy, if no other considerations were

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<sup>16</sup> Leacock is also described as a progressive merchant, by Hoyos (1974: 80).

present.’ But there were other considerations. Most importantly, there was too little data to be able to forecast precisely the cost of the scheme. Given that it would be easier to raise benefits in future than to reduce them, pensions should be introduced at a lower level. The Governor stated that there were sufficient funds to pay for the pensions at a low level of benefits (*Hansard*, Legislative Council debates, 26<sup>th</sup> January 1937: 5). Soon after, the *Annual Report* from the Barbados colonial administration confirmed that the committee’s recommendations had been adopted ‘with slight modifications’, and ‘legislation to bring the scheme into operation is now being prepared’ (*Annual Report*, 1936-37: 34).

The Old Age Pensions Bill, providing for benefits of only 1/6 per week rather than the 2/6 recommended by the Committee, reached the legislature late in 1937 (after the outbreak of riots at the end of July). The House of Assembly and then the Legislative Council debated the Bill in October. Walcott, who introduced the Bill in the House of Assembly, described the pensions in terms that emphasised their similarity with pensions for civil servants that were a reward for their previous service. He had met no one, he said, who did ‘not agree with the principle that those persons who have served the country in whatever capacity during their best years of life should in their old age not be left to depend on any person for their living, but should have something to keep starvation from the door’. The linkage of the right to a pension to service to Barbados also explained why there was a residential requirement, as Barbadians who had lived abroad were not considered to have contributed sufficiently to the island (*Hansard*, House of Assembly debates, 12<sup>th</sup> October 1937: 579, 581). The pension scheme was estimated to cost just over £16,000, of which £15,000 was for benefits and just over £1,000 (less than 10%) for administration.

The only criticisms voiced in the House of Assembly were criticisms of the parsimony of the pension scheme. Walcott himself noted that several members of the Committee had preferred to make people eligible from the age of sixty-five, but that the Committee had come to realise that this was not affordable. Echoing the Governor, he said that it was wise to start with a high age and low benefit, and improve these if and when the statistics showed it was affordable, as he hoped would be the case (*Ibid*: 575, 579). Braithwaite welcomed the Bill: ‘the great majority of the people of this country are agriculturalists, and certainly, after the age of sixty-five or seventy years they have become so weak and infirm that they are not capable of further work’. But he also bemoaned the age and benefits. A pension of 3s per week would cost only £30,000 (instead of £15,000), plus administrative costs; this could be financed out of increased income tax, which was warranted for the support of ‘these old people who would have given their best service to the country and who are the backbone of this island – the man in the field, the man by whose sweat we live’ (*Ibid*: 576).

The newly-elected black representative for Bridgetown, H.A. Vaughan of the Democratic League, urged that the age of eligibility be 65, as was the case for public employees' pensioners (*Ibid*: 578).

There was more opposition to the Bill in the Legislative Council, where the conservative planters S.C. Thorne and J.D. Chandler argued strongly with the progressive Dr Hutson. Introducing the Bill in the Legislative Council, the Colonial Secretary described the scheme as 'experimental' (*Hansard*, Legislative Council debates, 18<sup>th</sup> October 1937: 191), but Hutson immediately emphasised its similarity to schemes elsewhere: 'The practice of granting an old age pension is more or less universal in civilized countries; and it is particularly needed in overcrowded communities such as ours where it will be of assistance not only to the pensioners themselves but to sons and daughters and other relations who are at present called upon to accept a great deal of the responsibility of supporting those no longer able to work' (*Ibid*: 191).

Opponents of the Bill did not attack the principle of pensions directly, but rather criticised the administrative arrangements. Although the administrative costs were estimated at only just over £1,000 per year, critics of the Bill condemned these as excessive and urged instead that the scheme be administered by the existing Poor Law Guardians appointed by the Vestries. Thorne declared that the Poor Law Guardians 'know the people, their names, where they live and they know, as far as it is possible to know, what are their ages'. Age was a particular concern to Thorne: 'Whoever is appointed to look after these people will have to do a lot of guessing in arriving at their ages, whereas in the parishes we have officers who for years and years have been separating the sheep from the goats, and who know those people who are deserving of a pension and those that are not' (*Ibid*: 193-4).

Hutson explained that the committee had decided that it would be better to administer this quite independently from poor relief, as was the case in Britain. The Poor Law Guardians were busy enough already. In addition, he emphasised, the pension scheme was fundamentally different to poor relief:

I should also mention that another reason why the Committee did not recommend that this work should be undertaken by the Poor Law Authorities was that it was felt that this system is not poor relief, and it was not thought desirable that this pension to people who have served their country faithfully and well should be mixed up with poor relief. I may add that in England the very name of poor relief has been shelved. Poor Relief Authorities are now called Public Assistance Committees. The expression 'poor relief' has been wiped out altogether – abolished – and I hope very soon to see the same

thing done in Barbados (*Ibid*, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1937: 217. See also *ibid*, 18<sup>th</sup> October 1937: 193-4).

Chandler, however, continued to insist that the pension was ‘charity’, i.e. was a form of poor relief rather than a right. Hutson indignantly replied that he was a Government pensioner himself, i.e. he received a pension from the Government as a former civil servant, and he was not in receipt of ‘charity’. Echoing Walcott in the House of Assembly, Hutson declared that pensions generally were ‘a reward for service rendered in the interests of the community’ (*Ibid*, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1937: 218).

Chandler registered an additional, principled, objection to the Bill: it was not contributory, and would probably escalate in cost. The absence of contributions would lead to ‘social irresponsibility’:

We all know what will happen. No matter what the politics of any individual may be – be he conservative, liberal, radical, socialist or communist – if he desires to obtain a seat in the Lower Chamber, all he will have to do is to make old age pensions one of the main planks in his platform by pledging himself to get the rate of the pension increased. That is what is happening in other countries and it will surely happen here (*Ibid*: 218).

He recommended adopting the revised, 1925 British model: non-contributory pensions on an interim basis for the already elderly, and a contributory system for younger people. Failure to do this, he said, would result in pressure from the Lower Chamber for increases in pensions that the Lower House knew were unaffordable. Just as proponents of the Barbadian Bill used the discourses or rights and desert that were employed in Britain ‘new liberal’ and labour reformers, so conservatives in Barbados used the discourse and arguments employed by British conservatives (Macnicol, 1998). Chandler’s arguments and his espousal of the 1925 British model, introduced by the Conservative Party, indicated that British precedents were well understood in Barbados.

Chandler’s criticism seems to have been ignored, but the Bill was passed only when the dissenters were assured that pension officers would be appointed initially on a temporary basis only, and the administrative arrangements would be reviewed after a year. The conservatives on the Legislative Council sought to establish that the pensions were an extension of poor relief, which meant that they remained discretionary and under the control of the Vestries. They were opposed to the expansion of the executive, under the control of the Governor. Like their counterparts in other countries, the conservatives were opposed to state- and especially welfare-state building. In Barbados, however, they only succeeded in softening their defeat, in that the expansion of the executive to



administer the pension scheme was provisional, subject to review. The defeat of opponents of the Bill, despite their appearing to command a majority in the Legislative Council, must have reflected their political weakness in the face of rising pressures for reform both from below, articulated increasingly by Braithwaite and others in the House of Assembly, and from above, from a reformist Governor and Colonial Office in London, all against the backdrop of the riots that occurred in July.

The old-age pension scheme came into operation on 1<sup>st</sup> May, 1938. Pensions were being paid to more than 4,000 pensioners by the end of the financial year in March, 1939. The total cost and administrative expenses were very much as anticipated, at less than £20,000 p.a., or about 3 percent of the administration's total expenditure (*Annual Report*, 1938-39). The cost was low primarily because the pension benefit was so meager. At 1/6 per week, it was a fraction of the benefit paid in Britain (10 shillings), New Zealand or Australia (about 20 shillings) or even South Africa (about 16 shillings for white people, about 8 shillings for coloured people). It was not so low relative to wages, however. The Barbadian old-age pension per week was approximately the same as the daily wage of an unskilled man and more than the daily wage of an adult woman on a sugar plantation. Furthermore, pensioners were also eligible for poor relief in addition to their pension.

## **The context of social policy reform**

Old-age pensions were not the only reform being discussed in 1936-37. The Governor, Sir Mark Young, repeatedly drew attention to the pressing problems of poverty on the island, putting forward or backing a series of reforms. Opening the 1935-36 session of the Legislative Council and House of Assembly, Young reminded legislators that in 1934 they had been 'faced with the prospect of widespread difficulty and distress in consequence of the anticipated shortage of the [sugar] crop and the resulting lack of employment'. The immediate response had been through the existing system of poor relief. The Vestries had been asked to report on the situation in each parish and, if necessary, to recommend possible relief works to alleviate unemployment. Despite late rains, a small grant had been made to the poor parish of St Lucy (on the north of the island), and a small grant would probably be made to the parish of St Michael (around Bridgtown) (*Hansard*, Legislative Council, 10<sup>th</sup> Dec, 1935: 3). Although the reduced sugar crop meant fewer tax revenues for the government, £233,000 had been spent on social services, of which £57,000 was for education, £46,000 for the medical services run by the central administration, £91,000 for parochial relief (run by the Vestries, supplementing their own funds), sanitation

and health; and £27,000 was spent on free water supplies (*Ibid*: report tabled in Legislative Council).

The Governor pushed for more far-reaching initiatives in five main areas besides non-contributory old-age pensions: the management of employment, housing schemes, programmes around health and nutrition, old-age pensions for a wider range of government employees, and the resettlement of people from Barbados on other islands as peasant farmers. In 1933 the new Governor appointed an Unemployment Committee to examine unemployment in Bridgetown and St Michael parish. The Committee recommended the establishment of an Employment Agency to help find jobs for the unemployed. This was established at the end of 1933. Two years later, the Governor reported that this was proving useful (*Ibid*, 10<sup>th</sup> Dec, 1935: 3). In December 1933, the Governor also appointed a Housing Committee – including O’Neale – to investigate housing schemes and slum clearance. This led to the 1936 Bridgetown Housing Act, modeled on the 1925 and 1930 British Housing Acts.<sup>17</sup> In July 1936 the Governor appointed a Committee to examine nutrition and public health. This led to the introduction of a scheme to distribute milk and biscuits to elementary school children in September 1937 (House of Assembly, 14<sup>th</sup> September 1937: 553). The Public Employees Pensions Act, passed in the House of Assembly on 13<sup>th</sup> July 1937, provided for the government to pay pensions not only to its former white-collar civil servants (who were covered under a 1925 Pensions Act) but also to blue-collar public employees such as artisans, gardeners, cleaners, labourers and porters. Finally, the Governor promoted plans to resettle people from Barbados in British Guiana and (later) on the island of St Lucia. The first scheme came to naught, but the second appeared promising until the land set aside for the resettlement of 2,000 people was given over to a US airforce base. In addition, the Masters and Servants Act was amended to decriminalise the breaking of a contract by a sugar estate worker (*Annual Report on the Social and Economic Progress of the People of Barbados, 1937-38*). These reforms stood in sharp contrast to the more punitive or repressive policies adopted in the late 1910s (Browne, 1996: 9-24), echoing instead the policy reforms introduced in Britain in response to the Great Depression.

These reforms may have been shaped by more progressive ideas from Britain, but they were driven very much by the hard realities of the Barbadian economy and society in the 1930s. The combination of global overproduction and the Great Depression had depressed the price of sugar, deepening considerably the difficulties facing the West Indian sugar industry. This was clear from the Report, in 1930, of the West Indian Sugar Commission (the Olivier Commission) (*Report on the Sugar Industry of the West Indies and British*

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<sup>17</sup> The debate in the Legislative Council pitted the conservative planter Thorne against the medical reformer, Hutson (1<sup>st</sup> December 1936: 232-40).

*Guiana*, 1930). The sugar industry was sustained in the mid-1930s through special tariff preferences from Britain and some tax relief in Barbados. In the face of poor rains and small harvests as well as continuing uncertainty over prices, the Barbados Sugar Producers' Association sent a delegation to London to lobby for the continuation of Special Preferences, and the Barbados legislature appointed a Joint Select Committee to examine the problems. The Committee reported that the special preference on sugar had been worth £804,000 over the ten-year period 1925-34 (although Canada was the major export market). Without the preference, the cost of producing sugar would have been much higher than the sale price, and planters would be forced out of production; 'in such an event it is difficult to envisage the subsequent plight of the population'.<sup>18</sup> As Young told the legislature at the end of 1935, 'the future prospects of the sugar industry and of world prices are a matter for very real anxiety' (Legislative Council, 10<sup>th</sup> Dec, 1935: 7).

However, the problems in the sugar industry were not just problems of overall production, they were fundamentally also problems of distribution. The extreme concentration of land ownership in Barbados and the ubiquitous planting of sugar cane meant that there was very little smallholder production of food and an over-supply of labour and hence low wages. Unsurprisingly, there had been persistent calls for land reform, i.e. for breaking up some of the large sugar plantations and the fostering of a more independent peasantry producing food as well as export crops. This had been recommended by a Royal Commission as early as 1897, and was recommended again by the Olivier Commission in 1930. Criticising the lack of reform between 1897 and 1930, the Olivier Commission advocated a package of measures to promote peasant production: 'The peasant cultivator, if he is to thrive, must have land which he knows is his own and which he can improve, a homestead in which he can take pride, access by roads, facilities for marketing, and a proper water supply' (*Report on the Sugar Industry*, p.58). This model had been implemented on St Vincent and elsewhere, but on Barbados had been blocked by the powerful planters. The Olivier Commission singled Barbados out for special criticism. Macmillan also advocated strongly the 'reconstruction' of society and economy in the West Indies through the promotion of a peasantry. This, he suggested, was the only way of solving the 'distinctive West Indian "problem"' of a 'landless proletariat of casual workers, left stranded by the long and gradual decline of the industry which brought them there' (Macmillan, 1935: 29). He cited the example of Jamaica, where smallholders were successfully growing bananas for export as well as other food for local consumption. Macmillan also noted the power of Barbadian planters in blocking the reconstruction that would give some

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<sup>18</sup> "Report prepared for the use of the delegates by the Joint Select Committee of both Houses of the Legislature", dated 27<sup>th</sup> August 1935 and tabled in the Legislative Council, 10<sup>th</sup> Dec 1935.

substance to British colonial rhetoric of ‘trusteeship’ (*Ibid*, chapter 7). The planters, he wrote, ‘still own most of the land, and dominate counsel, infect even administrative officials with their own doubt and fears; overwhelmed by the task of keeping themselves afloat they have little leisure for a mission as “trustees of civilization”’ (*Ibid*: 62).

The economic, political and social power of the Barbadian planters meant that land reform was an implausible option in practice, whatever its merits in principle. The Colonial Office in London had not acted on Olivier Commission’s recommendation that financial assistance to the colonies be made conditional on taking the steps required to establish an independent peasantry. In Barbados itself, the opportunist Adams, having abandoned his earlier vehemently anti-socialist position, told the Moyne Commission in January 1939 that the sugar industry should be nationalised. Pressed, however, he retreated to the much more moderate position that the sugar factories and marketing should be nationalised, leaving the estates themselves in private ownership. Speaking on behalf of the new Barbados Progressive League, Adams called for higher taxes (especially estate taxes) and labour legislation.<sup>19</sup> Even Clement Payne, the most radical if perhaps unfocused leader of the period, emphasised the extension of rights to working people rather than the abolition of the property rights of the wealthy.

The Depression encouraged social policy reform in another way. Until the Depression, British colonial officials had assumed that international trade alone would bring prosperity in the colonies as in Britain, and that colonial policies should therefore be based on classic, ‘laissez-faire’ liberalism. Collapsing prices shattered this illusion. By 1937, according to Lee and Petter, discussions in the Colonial Office in London were focused on ‘what was called social expenditure, how much the colonies could afford to spend on the social services, particularly health, education, and various forms of welfare’ (Lee and Petter, 1982: 25). Social reforms went hand-in-hand with developmental interventions. As Macmillan had explained: ‘Whatever the shade of the people’s skins health services are needed, and more and better education, which can only be paid for by more efficient production, by organising markets and applying the teaching of the new agriculture’ (Macmillan, 1935: 15). Thus was born the new colonial strategy of emphasising development and welfare.

The conservative planter-merchant elite in Barbados might have been forced to accept old-age pensions and other social reforms, but they succeeded in preventing any major overhaul of the island’s taxes, with the result that the funds available for social programmes remained very constrained. In 1935,

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<sup>19</sup> Summary of the hearings in Barbados of the Moyne Commission, January 1939 (BAD Ref F 2041 G7 1939).

Adams had proposed increased income and estate taxes on the rich. Unsuccessful, he recognised that franchise reform was necessary to break decisively the power of the conservatives (Hoyos, 1974: 46). As an industry exposed to international competition, taxes on the profits of the sugar plantation might have been counter-productive, but taxes on rich and wealthy individuals was a different matter. The failure of the colonial administration to consider tax reform indicates the limits of their reformism.

The slow and tentative shift toward social reforms in Barbados in the mid-1930s reflected both the beginnings of a shift in British colonial policy in general and the specific impetus to reforms in Barbados. Barbados was characterised not only by extreme inequality, but the power of the planters ruled out any significant agrarian reforms based on the promotion of an independent peasantry. The initiative for social reforms might have come from the Governor, but he was under growing pressure from – and was working with – the emergent black political elite. In 1934, a new radical newspaper – the *Observer* – had been founded by Wynter Crawford. Adams, elected to the House of Assembly in the same year, had become the ‘enfant terrible’ of Barbadian politics, clashing angrily with conservatives.<sup>20</sup> In 1936, Braithwaite proposed a Bill extending the franchise; passed by the House of Assembly, it was blocked by the Legislative Council. ‘Power in this colony rests in the hands of a narrow, bigoted, selfish, grasping plutocracy’, wrote Adams in the *Observer* in November 1936 (*Barbados Observer*, 14<sup>th</sup> November 1936, quoted in Hoyos, 1974: 57). (Soon after the Legislative Council blocked the franchise reform, Governor Young put forward plans to reform the membership of the Legislative Council, replacing indefinite tenure with finite terms). The Governor and black leaders were supported, in social policy reforms, by a range of white liberal Barbadians, including the Anglican Bishop and rectors as well as Walcott, Hutson and others in the legislature. Whilst unable, or perhaps unwilling, to challenge the property rights of the planters, they comprised a powerful coalition behind social reform to ameliorate the inequalities produced by planter capitalism.

## **Riots, the Deane Commission and the weakening of conservative opposition to reform**

In the middle of the process of introducing old-age pensions, Barbadian politics was transformed by ‘disturbances’ (or rebellion, as some prefer (Browne,

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<sup>20</sup> The phrase was Clennell Wickham’s, quoted in Hoyo, *Grantley Adams*, p.52.

2001)). Riots in Bridgetown were followed by some cane-burning and other incidents in the countryside. For the Governor, Sir Mark Young, the riots provided an opportunity to advance his reformist agenda. He immediately announced that he would appoint a Commission to investigate the causes of the riots, secured the necessary support in the legislature, and appointed a Commission comprising three men who could be counted on to recommend a programme of continued social and other reforms. In this he was both pushed and assisted by progressive coloured Barbadian political elites, whose importance and confidence rose considerably as a result of the riots. The Deane Commission's report, completed in November 1937, not only provided a clear indictment of the prevalent social and economic conditions but also provided unambiguous endorsement of an accelerated reform programme. The riots and Deane Commission served to strengthen the reformist coalition and weaken conservative opposition.

Strikes and demonstrations had occurred elsewhere in the West Indies in 1935, and in June 1937, a strike in Trinidad escalated into general rioting and repression. Earlier in 1937, Clement Payne had arrived in Barbados from Trinidad, and began to organise among workers in Bridgetown. In a rambling address to a crowd on 20<sup>th</sup> July, according to the notes taken by a policeman, Payne said that he was in Barbados to organise the 'poor labourers', who should have 'an Old Age pension, Workmen Compensation and Compulsory Education Acts'.<sup>21</sup> The authorities arrested Payne and charged him with providing false information when he arrived on Barbados. Payne was convicted, but – with Adams as his lawyer – appealed successfully against the conviction. Nonetheless, the authorities deported Payne on the 26<sup>th</sup> July. That same evening riot began, intensifying on the 27<sup>th</sup>, and continuing for several days. A total of fourteen people were killed, according to the subsequent Commission of Enquiry.<sup>22</sup> Adams, other black politicians and the Commission of Enquiry all eagerly agreed that the audience at Payne's meetings and the participants in the subsequent riots were primarily 'young and irresponsible members of the community in Bridgetown', whose passions Payne had excited; 'the genuine working man in Bridgetown and the vast majority of agricultural labourers in the country took no part' (Deane Report, para. 3 and 7). But the list of fatalities and people convicted in connection with the riots shows that most participants were working people, of a range of ages and included women as well a men. This was clearly a working-class rebellion against miserable working and living conditions.

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<sup>21</sup> Special Branch report, reprinted in Addington Forde (1999).

<sup>22</sup> *Report of the Commission appointed to enquire into The Disturbances which took place in Barbados on the 27<sup>th</sup> July 1937 and subsequent days* (henceforth Deane Report), 1937. The riots are discussed in detail in Browne, (2001) and Beckles (2004: 7-23); also Hoyos (1974: 59-65).

The Governor had undertaken to appoint a Commission as early as 29<sup>th</sup> July. Both the terms of reference and the composition of the Commission reflected the Governor's objective of focusing on working and living conditions, and legitimating appropriate reforms. The Commission was instructed 'to enquire into any circumstances or representations connected with the causes of the disturbed conditions prevailing in this Island on the 27<sup>th</sup> July, 1937 and on subsequent days', but any possible uncertainty was dispelled when the Governor told the Legislative Council that the Commission needed to understand and address the underlying problem of the living conditions of law-abiding citizens (*Hansard*, Legislative Council, 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1937). He appointed, as chairman of the Commission, Sir George Deane, who had recently retired after a judicial career in the West Indies (including as Chief Justice of the Leeward Islands) and West Africa (where his last post was Chief Justice of the Gold Coast) (Kirk-Greene, 1991: 93). The other two members were Erskine Ward and Matthew A. Murphy. Ward, who was a coloured Barbadian, was a key appointment. Born in 1900, educated in law in Oxford, he had returned to Barbados where he became an active participant in the island's politics, joining the Democratic League and writing in the *Herald*. In February 1930 he had been elected as a member of the House of Assembly, but resigned at the end of 1931 when he was appointed as a magistrate. In 1937 he was promoted to judge. Ward's beliefs may have been those of Tom Paine rather than Keir Hardie, but he was unambiguously a reformist.<sup>23</sup> In January 1937, Adams described him in the press as having been, in the House of Assembly in the early 1930s, 'the fiery champion of all that was aimed at ameliorating the unhappy condition of the poor, downtrodden sections of the community' (*Barbados Observer*, 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1937, quoted in Hoyos, 1974). Murphy was a retired civil servant from Trinidad (Johnson, 1977: 77). The composition of the Committee – a judge and civil servant from off the island, together with a coloured Barbadian judge with unambiguous progressive credentials, with no representation of conservative groups on the island – indicated the Governor's general intent.

The Commission held a total of 31 meetings, hearing from 135 witnesses as well as receiving a number of written submissions. The sessions proceeded through three stages. In the first stage, three coloured members of the House of Assembly (Adams, Vaughan and Brancker), followed by a series of small farmers, small proprietors and workers, gave what appears from the record to have been a concerted body of evidence on how conditions on the sugar plantations and elsewhere on the island had driven people to protest. This was followed by a series of progressive white witnesses, including priests and employers, who corroborated the earlier evidence. The priests were especially forthright. The Anglican Bishop, together with the Rectors of Bridgetown and

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<sup>23</sup> Paine had proposed a universal old-age pension in *The Rights of Man*.

St Philip, testified on the depth of poverty and in support of housing and other schemes for the poor. One of the rectors said that he thought that the colony could afford an old-age pension of 10 shillings per month, and described pensions as being not charity but ‘a necessary and normal expenditure of the State to meet the rights of its citizens’ (Rev. Shankland (Rector of Bridgetown), Deane Commission hearings, 24<sup>th</sup> August 1937). The second rector called for unemployment insurance. All three emphasised the inadequacy of poor relief. Godson, who was at the time an acting Member of the Legislative Council, argued slightly differently, agreeing that old-age pensions should be ‘speeded up’ but adding that that poor relief should be expanded and charities subsidised (Deane Commission hearings, 26<sup>th</sup> August 1937).

In the final stage of the hearings, representatives of the planter and merchant elite appeared before the Commission. The transcript of the hearings shows that the Commission paid very detailed attention to the economics of the sugar industry (as well as to wages in a range of other sectors). Both Deane and Ward clashed with the spokesman for the sugar producers, their accountant, Mr (later Sir) Archibald Cuke. Ward, who frequently spoke of a ‘fair’ price for cane, accused some factories of ‘robbing’ smallholder growers. When Cuke protested at the word ‘robbing’, Deane pressed him on whether agricultural labourers were underpaid. ‘You must admit that that state of affairs cannot go on’, Deane said; ‘the men’s expenses have risen owing to the increases in the price of food.’ Cuke remained evasive; pressed for a solution, he said that the sugar producers were pressing for a higher price so that they could pay higher wages. Deane retorted that ‘You have fought your side of the case well, but you have forgotten the agricultural labourer’. Cuke would only concede that ‘while the quantum of wages paid is as much as the plantations can stand, there has been maldistribution’ [sic] (Deane Commission hearings, 13<sup>th</sup> September 1937: 18-19).

The Commission’s Report reflected their critical stance during the hearings.<sup>24</sup> The ‘Payne incident’ was the ‘immediate cause of the disturbances’, the Commissioners found, but the ‘disturbances’ were not ‘a mere flash in the pan’; rather, ‘there was a large accumulation of explosive matter in the island to which the Payne incident only served as a detonator’; the ‘real cause’ of the disturbances was economic. (The Commission was also critical, implicitly, of the police handling of the situation; had the police appreciated its severity, the principal disturbances might have been avoided). Overpopulation had resulted in increased chronic and seasonal unemployment, and migration from the rural parishes into the Bridgetown area. It was the absence of opportunities for employment and of recreational facilities that led to ‘the growth of the class of idle and lawless vagrants who were chiefly responsible for the damage to

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<sup>24</sup> George Lamming recalls being told by Ward that Ward had authored most of the report.



property in Bridgetown.’ Unemployment also depressed wages, which were unjustifiably low. The Commissioners agreed that shareholders’ rights should be protected, ‘but in the final analysis the right of the shareholder or capitalist is no more than a right to a *reasonable* return on his capital; without labour capital would be valueless’; workers were ‘entitled to a *reasonable* standard of comfort and security’ (emphasis added).

The Commission made a number of general and specific recommendations. Generally, it suggested, the government should provide the ‘machinery’ to ensure that workers were paid a living wage: ‘It is clearly no less the duty of a Government to maintain a fair balance between capital and labour than to provide for the security of life and property’. The Commission recommended that the wages paid to agricultural (and other unskilled) labourers be increased by 20 percent, to rates that it described as being below a ‘reasonable subsistence level’ (based on a calculation of the cost of living) but were affordable (based on a careful consideration of the economics of the sugar industry). A Labour Officer should be appointed and machinery established to deal with employment disputes (modeled, perhaps, on New Zealand’s Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act). The government should also expand its public works programmes and, in the longer-term, develop new industries. The Commission praised the recent willingness of the legislature to consider ‘schemes of social amelioration’ (including old age pensions), but it needed to move faster on clearing slums and building proper housing for the poor. Finally, the Commission suggested that the resettlement elsewhere of the 20,000 permanently or seasonally unemployed people on the island was too massive a task for the Barbados government, so a Royal Commission should be appointed to investigate the whole issue of emigration and settlement throughout the West Indies.

This was both an endorsement of the Governor’s adoption of progressive social policies and an emphatic advocacy of an extension of government policy into the regulation of the relationship between employer and employee, especially but not only in the sugar industry. It was, quite clearly, a major shift from the *laissez-faire* (but repressive) ‘liberalism’ of the late nineteenth century towards the ‘new liberalism’ and labourist thinking that had become dominant in social policy in the UK itself in the early twentieth century. The Report legitimated the social policy reforms that Governor Young had initiated, and prompted a new programme of reforms to regulate employment on the basis of principles of ‘fairness’ and ‘justice’.

## The subsequent development of social policy

The introduction of old-age pensions in Barbados was a local not a metropolitan initiative. It is generally assumed that the local reality of policy implementation lagged behind metropolitan rhetoric.<sup>25</sup> But reforms were being implemented in Barbados in advance of even rhetoric in London. This suggests the need for a reassessment of the reform of colonial development policy into colonial development and welfare policy. Johnson has shown that the first signs of this reform in London predated the appointment of the Moyne Commission, and indeed that the decision to appoint a Royal Commission was in part a response to this nascent shift. Johnson suggests that the riots in Trinidad and Barbados in 1937 accelerated the rethinking in London of British colonial policy. As early as August 1937, as the Deane Commission was sitting, the Colonial Office recommended that dedicated labour departments be established in the colonies to supervise labour conditions. The receipt and then publication of the reports of the Deane and Forster Commissions (the latter on the disturbances in Trinidad and Tobago) confirmed the need for both social policy reforms and employment regulation. The ‘primary function’ of the Royal Commission, in Johnson’s careful assessment, was ‘to provide external sanction for measures which the colonial office regarded as essential to the wider policy of reconstruction’, deterring criticism and opposition to the reforms (Johnson, 1977: 69). What a case-study of Barbados shows is that a series of reforms, including especially the old-age pensions, were already being introduced at the time of the riots. The impetus from the colony was not merely that of direct action but also the practice of social policy reform.

Old-age pensions were introduced in Barbados because of an unusual confluence of factors. The island was dominated by an industry that was not only in crisis but which also generated deep inequalities and poverty. The planters retained sufficient power to block land reform or major increases in taxation. But, in the late 1930s, they were losing the power to block other reforms. A reformist administration, enjoying some autonomy from local elites, joined with more liberal white Barbadians and the nascent black Barbadian elite in pushing for reforms of social policy, the regulation of employment, and even political reforms. These reforms offered the best prospect of mitigating poverty given the obstacles to converting a landless proletariat into an independent peasantry through land reform. The reforms thus offered a form of class compromise between planters and workers, although the terms of the compromise were much less favourable to the latter than was the social democratic compromise being wrought in parts of Europe. The crucial difference between Barbados and Europe was, of course, that the Barbadian

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<sup>25</sup> See the discussion of housing policy in the Leeward Islands by Harris (2005).

poor did not have the vote. Whilst the actual economic benefits of social policy reform to the poor might have been limited, however, the reforms had a symbolic importance. The shift from poor relief to old-age pensions meant, in Barbados as in Britain, a shift from discretionary charity to a social right. This shift to a general recognition of rights was reflected, most fully, in the Deane Report.

Over the following decade the Barbadian old-age pension scheme had some broader importance. The Barbadian Old Age Pension Act was copied in the neighbouring colonies of Trinidad and Tobago and British Guiana. In Trinidad and Tobago, a Bill providing for old-age pensions was passed in June 1939. It provided pensions of \$3 per month to people over the age of 65, as well as to blind people over the age of 40. Pensions were payable from 1<sup>st</sup> July (*Yearbook of the British West Indies*, 1939). In British Guiana, old-age pensions were introduced in 1944 (*Development and Welfare in the West Indies, 1943-1944*, 1945). Of all the West Indian colonies, Trinidad and Tobago and British Guiana had by far the most healthy public finances, allowing more scope for expensive reforms.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, in Barbados, the age of eligibility for old-age pensions was reduced to 68 in 1942, and pensions were introduced for the blind from the age of 40; benefits were increased to 2s per week. Conservative members of the Legislative Council continued to oppose aspects of the pension programme, although they insisted, unconvincingly, that they were not opposed in principle. In 1945, following a reform of the franchise in Barbados that resulted in a fivefold increase in the electorate and the end of the planters' political power, old-age pension benefits were raised again to 3s per week. In 1947, an inquiry recommended a further and substantial increase in benefits, to \$5 per week, which would raise the cost by at least half to £88,000 (*Report on Old Age Pension System and its Administration*, 1947). By the mid-1940s, therefore, non-contributory old-age pensions had become an integral element of social policy in the three British colonies in the south-eastern corner of the Caribbean, i.e. Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, and British Guiana.

Young's performance in Barbados won approval from the Colonial Office in London. This was in stark contrast to his counterpart in Trinidad and Tobago, who was sacked at the end of 1937, whereupon Young was appointed as acting Governor there in addition to his responsibilities in Barbados. This may have contributed to some hesitation over further reform in Barbados. Young was further rewarded with promotion to Governor of Tanganyika in 1938 and then to Governor of Hong Kong in 1941.

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<sup>26</sup> Public revenues *per capita* were almost £10 in Trinidad and Tobago and £6 in British Guiana, compared to £4 in Barbados and British Honduras, £3 in Jamaica and the Leeward Islands, and less than £1 in the Windward Islands. Simey (1946), Appendix II.

These three colonies were, however, the exceptions in the broader colonial landscape. Proposals to introduce old-age pensions in Jamaica (in 1944) and Mauritius (through the early 1940s) were rejected (although only temporarily in Mauritius, where they were introduced in 1950). The Barbadian route of social policy reform proved to be a route that was, for the most part, *not* followed. Colonial policy was steered in a different direction, one that was recommended by the Moyne Commission and which seems to have accorded more closely with the prejudices of the Colonial Office in London. The Moyne Commission had recommended, in late 1939, a programme of social, labour and development policies that would require substantial funding from London. The labour policies were very much those already recommended by the Deane Commission and accepted by the Colonial Office: the appointment of Labour Officers, the recognition of trade unions, minimum wage legislation, and so on. Much of this had already been implemented in Barbados.<sup>27</sup> The development reforms were somewhat unclear,<sup>28</sup> but the social programme was spelt out clearly: West Indian society needed to be reconstructed through active social services.

What was meant by the ‘reconstruction’ of West Indian society was spelt out in the reports of the Comptroller for Development and Welfare in the West Indies, appointed in 1940, and even more fully in a book written by the first Social Welfare Advisor, Thomas Simey. The Comptroller advocated ‘modern’ social services, based around ‘constructive activity to assist individuals to play a useful part in community activities’ (Stockdale, 1943: 49). The problem was diagnosed not as one of poverty *per se* but rather of social disintegration, which was attributed to slavery and the forcible divorce of the West Indian from ‘his African culture’. Through individual casework and voluntary organisation, ‘communities’ would be strengthened and juvenile delinquency prevented. At the same time, resources would be invested in ‘developing’ a peasantry, through the improvement of production techniques as much as the provision of land. A new and modern peasantry and working class would be created (See especially Simey 1946: chapters IV and V). This was to be the general direction in which colonial policy was to move. It was articulated clearly in writing by influential figures such as Lord Hailey and Lucy Mair (Hailey, 1943; Mair, 1944).

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<sup>27</sup> Pre-Moyne employment reforms in Barbados included a Labour (Minimum Wage) Act (1938-18), an Employment of Women, Young Persons and Children Act (1938-42), a Labour Officer Act (1938-44), a Recruiting of Workers Act (1938-59), and a Trade Disputes Act (June 1939). Legislation providing for the legalisation of trade unions and for workmen’s compensation was put before the House of Assembly prior to the Moyne Report, but only passed thereafter. See *Annual Report*, 1938-39, p.18; Beckles (2004): 30-1. Browne (1996b) argues that there was a marked lack of action on the Deane Commission’s recommendations during the war.

<sup>28</sup> As Simey pointed out, the Moyne Commission’s neglect of economic issues was a ‘fundamental weakness’ (1946: 157).

This strategy entailed a conception of citizenship, but it was one based around the obligation on rich and poor alike to ‘participate in community activities, learn to share a common culture, and co-operate together to break down both economic and social barriers’ (*Development and Welfare in the West Indies, 1940-1942*, pp.161-2, quoted in Simey, 1946: 161-2). This was a very different conception of citizenship to the rights-based conception implicit in the provision of old-age pensions and the Deane Report more generally. In the new colonial strategy of the 1940s there was no place for old-age pensions. The Comptroller of Development and Welfare was quite explicit, suggesting at first that this was due to fiscal constraints:

The old age pension schemes in Trinidad and Barbados have had very beneficial results, but it does not seem possible to extend them elsewhere unless grants are made for the purpose under the Colonial Development and Welfare Act. This would involve, however, the assumption of a financial responsibility by the Government of the United Kingdom which would to all intents and purposes be unlimited. The recommendations that have been put forward in the Leeward Islands, St Lucia, and British Guiana have accordingly been limited to grant aid towards the building of cottage almshouses, of a similar type to those already erected in Nevis. It is hoped that this will make it possible for aged persons to continue to live in touch with their relatives and friends, and to avoid the necessity of submitting to the institutional rules which have to be enforced in the large central almshouses. This is, however, only a feasible alternative in country districts, where people are willing to continue to care for the aged persons concerned, and in particular to assist them by providing them with food (*Ibid*, pp.60-1).

The cost was a problem because the money should be spent on other things: on children, not the elderly; and on ‘community or nation-building services’, not poverty relief. Old-age pensions were popular, Simey conceded, but introducing them was ‘the path of least resistance’ rather than the most sensible response to social problems (Simey, 1946: 194-7).

Discouraged by the Colonial Office, the Barbadian model did not become a general model for social policy reform. All over the Empire, agricultural and social welfare officers sought to reconstruct peasant societies along the lines proposed by the Moyne Commission (For an example, see Lewis, 2000). Poverty thus came to be treated as a social as much as, if not more than, an economic condition. The British were slow to introduce even social insurance schemes for salaried and waged workers. In the specific conditions of Barbados in the 1930s, a local political coalition was able to develop an innovative

package of social reforms, but they had no leverage on the general shape of British colonial policy. The Barbadian old-age pension was an example of a policy in a colony that never became colonial policy.

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