

THE FEDERATION OF THE WEST INDIES: ITS LIFE AND END – A COMMENT

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The life and eventual demise of the Federation of the West Indies has remained an attractive topic for discussion for successive generations of West Indians. We have had accounts, in full or in part, notably the early and magisterial account, The West Indies: The Federal Negotiations by the late Sir John Mordecai, Deputy Governor General of the Federation for the period of its existence; but including also early reflections by Sir Hugh Springer, Jesse Proctor and Sir Shridath Ramphal, Attorney-General of the Federation. And Mordecai's book itself encompassed an epilogue by Sir Arthur Lewis, who played a substantial role in trying to turn the ending of the Federation into a new effort of Federation of the Eastern Caribbean, the so-called "Little Eight".

As with most historical and contemporary social and political events, the accounts of participant-observers are often prejudiced by the objectives that they themselves had, the roles which they came to play, and the extent to which success or failure advanced or pushed into the background their particular objectives. Yet we find in Mordecai's book a surprisingly objective and unemotional account, perhaps because as a public servant, he was able to stand aside and observe the manoeuvres of the real actors – the politicians and of those who were advising them. Yet he did not hesitate to make his own judgements of blame and failure – of levels of responsibility for the Federation's demise.

The failure of the Federation and of the Little Eight attempt, has, over the years continued to hang like a shadow over successive efforts at what today, following the jargon of the academics, we call "political integration" in the English-speaking Caribbean. The federal effort has allowed detractors of subsequent efforts of integration to instantly advise that, most of all, the inclination of leaders to accumulate, and hold a tight grip on the reigns of power and control in the separate jurisdictions, *ipso facto*, preordains failure, whatever the nice-sounding and persuasive verbal pronouncements of the actors. And at a similar level, to the extent that such efforts of integration are intended to include either Trinidad or Guyana, and particularly both together, then the issue of the politicians' fascination with racial balance similarly becomes a preordaining reason for failure.

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In the more modern period, other critics of the political integration effort are prone to attribute lack of success of such effort to even get off the ground, or to continue, to an issue related to the first which we have referred to. Here it is argued that in the British colonial territories at least, once the process of self-government attained a level at which there was a substantial constitutional transfer of “real”, institutionalised authority to local rulers, then that level of authority marked a point determining that there could be no transfer of the same (or parts of that) constitutional authority to any other locus of power, even though that locus might be as indigenous (in the sense of being Caribbean) as the local rulers. And indeed, Mordecai and others have noted that once the political rulers in the separate jurisdictions recognized that the British seemed willing to advance the constitutional status of the island governments in advance of the conclusion of the Federal negotiations, some quickly concluded that their priority of independence should or could take precedence of their federal commitment.

Finally, particularly in discussions of integration of the English-speaking Caribbean as a whole, the issue of the weight of participating parties is brought to the fore, as an inhibiting factor. In the early 1970's, this came to be known as the “sharks and sardines” factor. And it implied that as between the various territories, it would neither be a viable or beneficial effort to seek to blend into a single integration unit, large entities like Jamaica or Trinidad & Tobago, with the smaller entities. Instead, it is argued today, federation, or what is now called “political union” within our sub-region, should be preceded by a balancing of relative weights, this implying a cohesion of the smaller states as one bloc – as evidenced in the creations of the OECs for example, with that bloc operating as a single political entity vis-à-vis the larger participants.

This latter possibility, was not, of course, on the cards during the Federal negotiations. Indeed the opposite was the case, since the concepts and institutional arrangements of Windward Islands administrations and Leeward Islands administrations under separate executive authority (Governors) was to be dissolved in favour of single island participation. Nonetheless that intellectual orientation, as pertaining to the West Indies in particular, remains, and has, I suspect, increasing force today, partly because the “shark and sardines” imagery is still deemed to have emerge from a concrete reality about small entity-big entity behavior; and indeed, it also reflects the long-stated rationale for unification of the English-speaking Caribbean as a whole: that vis-à-vis the rest of the world there is “strength in numbers. ” We can put this in context by taking an example external to the Caribbean – what we can call the “Benelux” reference: the decision that the Benelux Customs Union should not dissolve itself into the European Community structure after 1958, since it would still retain post-EC value in terms of the particular objectives of the smaller states of Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg, deriving from their particular size attributes. On the other hand of course, these countries, while retaining their own subregional structure, did in fact join the EC as separate entities.

Nonetheless, this is an argument that has been arising again, as a large number of small states, have joined the European Union in the post-Cold War world.

Yet, most of the various attributions of failure to which we have referred, tend to point the finger mainly at human deficiencies: the particular personalities of the local actors and their private motivations, mistakes, mispitches, frailties and cynicisms about the process. Such attributions are attractive as explanations especially when the writers have been close to the scene, and have seen and heard the emperors naked, so to speak. And the conclusion to the positing of these attribution is that they act as permanent factors probably inhibiting for all time, successful efforts at integration. The psychology of politics, is in these explanations, the predominant explanatory variable.

Thus it can be argued from Mordecai's account, that the private, presumably lifelong ambition of Bustamante to lead his country, and more particularly to win the Jamaican General elections slated for 1959 – one year after the founding of the Federation – determined his general approach, and more particularly his tactical approach to the issue of federation; even though the Federal elections, won by the West Indian Federal Labour Party of Manley et al, were won without victories in either of the largest countries, Jamaica or Trinidad & Tobago. In this case, Federation seemed to become an expendable manoeuvre, with success at the national elections being given long term precedence.

Similarly, Mordecai, and with more emphasis Arthur Lewis, has argued that in the cases of both the Federation and the Little Eight exercises, the apparent inability, on the part of the political leaders, to conduct discussions and negotiations in a civil manner in the course of political discourse about inevitably difficult issues, almost constituted a permanent political bloc to any success in achieving their main objective of federation. Lewis, following Mordecai's description of events writes stringently on this, and is worth quoting at length:

“Clearly the leadership of the Federation was awful.....This itself was odd, since the three heads of government whose head-on collisions, despite their unquestioned allegiance to the cause, ultimately wrecked the Federation – Adams, Manley and Williams – were all men of the highest quality, on any definition of that word. Their talents were outstanding, and their education...the envy of mankind. These were men of immaculate integrity and selfless devotion to the public service. Each was at the top of his profession before entering public life, and gained neither prestige nor money from politics. Each would be recognized in any country in the world as a public servant of the highest calibre

Yet, they were defective on two major counts. First, they shared with most eager radicals a fundamental failure to understand the nature of a federation [vis-à-vis a unitary state, and he elaborates of this. Then he comes to his second main point:

“The other big failure was a lack of understanding of the principles of social intercourse between equals. Almost from the beginning they adopted a standard pattern for communicating with each other. This was based on ‘open diplomacy’, which in practice meant shouting at each other by press or radio, or by issuing Ministry Papers or obtaining binding resolutions in their legislative assemblies before setting off to meet each other....This neglect of the elementary rules of diplomacy soon poisoned the personal relationships between the three men, and between them and the Federal leaders of the other islands, with the result that by the middle of 1961 the chief champions of the Federation were hardly on speaking terms with each other. Most ex-colonial politicians have shown ignorance of the elementary rules of diplomatic behavior, and have had to learn that one does not treat colleagues in the same way as one has behaved towards the Colonial Office. This has been painful and costly. In a way, the dissolution of the West Indian Federation has been one of the costs of learning”. (Mordecai, pp.457-58).

So this too is a school of thought that, perceives the psychological variable as significant in the making of political behavior, and in this context to the conduct of the Federal negotiations, and sees it also as a hangover of our colonial conditioning. Mordecai quotes Bustamante as referring to Eric Williams as an “intellectual fool”. Do we hear resonances of this today as we refer to each other as “mendicants”? And if so, what have we learnt from past experiences?

On the influence of the more narrowly psychological factors, Mordecai gives adequate descriptions of the effects of the particular personality of Sir Grantley Adams, which he suggests, added fuel to the fires lit against Manley in Jamaica by Bustamante. The question of a given personality, and the effects on it, negative or positive, of the complexities and burdens of political action is one that needs more investigation in respect of the Caribbean, taking us beyond analysis of the specific issue of the influence and consequences of so-called “charismatic personalities”.

On the other hand, a school of academic writers emerging after the failure of federation, has tended to point more to what are described as “structural” factors: non-personality factors which, in whatever geographical location, positively predispose, or on the other hand inhibit, efforts towards political, or for that matter economic, integration. [Springer et al]. Analysis began to be written in terms of such pre-disposing or enabling as against inhibiting factors. For example, it was argued that the structures of the economies should be complementary rather than competitive, thus allowing for the possibilities for mutually beneficial exchanges of goods

– and indeed, contrary to contemporary thinking, countries should therefore not be producing the same goods, since if they did so, they would find themselves selling only to their own markets and therefore defeating the economies of scale requirement.

It is this argument that we can see, in the course of 1958-61, bedeviling discussions, which became disputes, on the issue of the location of an oil refinery in Jamaica, and on the wider customs union issue, and causing substantial bad blood between Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago, and their leaders Manley and Williams, whose national political parties were both members of the governing West Indian Federal Labour Party. The establishment of an oil refinery in Jamaica would, of course in the Trinidad view, compromise the market possibilities of the Trinidad refinery.

We see also the issue of customs union and free trade also bedeviling relations between Bustamante and Manley. As Mordecai writes,

“Customs Union raised a number of issues which tended to get mixed up...It involved internal free trade. Trinidad tended to concentrate on this aspect, because this would widen the markets for its manufactures. Mr Manley also always claimed to favour a quick approach to internal free trade, though Bustamante disliked this aspect of the Customs Union, because he wanted Jamaica’s manufactures to be protected against competition from Trinidad. The smaller islands argued that internal free trade, which forced them to discriminate in favour of goods from Trinidad and Jamaica as against the rest of the world, would reduce their national incomes: and demanded some compensating benefit. *They therefore tended to link freedom movement of persons with internal free trade in goods, [my italics]and to resist Mr Manley’s proposal to move rapidly towards internal free trade before they could get their quid pro quo.*” (p.55)

Lewis, in his Epilogue, tends to argue for a spirit of compromise in matters of this sort, since he observes, the nature and spirit of federation implies that if there are difficulties in one side refusing to come to terms with the insistences of another, then the matter should be dropped, at least temporarily, since there are other reasons for federation which surely supersede the particular difficulty. And he argues that the leaders did not seem to clearly understand that if they were agreeing to a federation, they were not simultaneously agreeing to what could be seen as attributes of a unitary state. He notes that with the failure of the Federation, it is significant that Williams’ offer to the smaller islands was that of a unitary state with Trinidad & Tobago.

Here really is a certain intimation that the choice of federation preceded sufficient mutual understanding of what might be involved, given the peculiarities of the various islands who were to participate. And that diplomacy could, or did not, succeeded in bridging gaps. But

where was that diplomacy to come from? It does not seem, from the description of the personalities of the various individuals involved that they felt that 'outside' diplomacy was required. And in a sense, there was no real benefit in looking towards the "mother country" which itself was at that time, refusing to accommodate itself to the integration realities of its neighbouring continent. British insularism shows itself well in the straight-jacketed manner in which Maudling and others were anxious to get the Caribbean federal structure going with minimal consideration of the peculiarities of these small, and relatively (as it was looked at the time) largely resourceless countries.

In retrospect we can surely claim (Conclusion No.1) that neither the willingness of British diplomatic skill, nor the potential of British assistance of a meaningful kind, was sufficiently forthcoming, to grease paths towards the resolution of disputes, and so to facilitate the accommodation of the contending local parties and negotiators, and therefore facilitate also, a chance of a successful federal experiment.

On the other hand of course, we sometimes hear resonances today, of the consequences of a full acceptance of, not now free trade/customs union arguments as they were then posed – structural adjustment and the WTO have dealt with that – but of the movement of people aspect as a complement to free trade, rights of establishment and the like. And it seems there too, the pressures for public diplomacy threaten to affect proper relations among parties to the same integrating entity. How much have we learnt? And is the wisdom of the present any more substantial than the wisdom of the past, so-called "ex-colonial" leaders. (But take this as no more than a throw-away line).

Yet in our discussions of the failure of federation in the West Indies, it is important to recognize the non-uniqueness of what was happening, if placed against the canvas of European colonial relations as a whole. From that perspective, what happened was being paralleled over the colonial world, with the simultaneous failures of British and French established federations in Africa and in the failure of the Malaysia Federation. For these failures there are all specific main reasons, while even the success of the Nigerian Federation had to be preceded by an American-type civil war experience.

To remark on this is not to provide an excuse for the West Indian failure, but to allow us to look partly outside our own boundaries for reasons as to whether the structures that we were constructing had a reasonable chance of success. Analysts often remark, of course, that there can always be differences in cases which are defined within the same category or genus for other specific reasons. The Mordecai analysis points to the expectations of agreement deriving from familiarity among the leaders, their common socialization mainly in the United Kingdom, and their, for the most part common understanding of the deficiencies of small size and the implications of this for viable and respectable nationhood.

On the other hand, the manner of creation of these, can we call them, regional fabrications of federalism in the colonial world, deriving so often from external strategic calculations, even when there have been domestic impulses to integration, must also be analysed in our discussions of failure.

Here was an attempt, in the case of the West Indies and elsewhere, by the colonial powers, really to respond to the consequences of the Second World War: the insistence by the US (as in the First World War) that the price of its participation – and by extension the price of the whole hearted participation of the colonials in Asia and Africa – in that Second World war, must be the decolonization of the European territories - particularly those in Asia – India and Indonesia. But that that decolonization must make “strategic sense”, unlike the denouement of the First World War in Central Europe and the Balkans; and strategic too in the face of the insistence, both in India and Indonesia, that that decolonization must be, let us call it, a “unified” one. So that even though India ended up as a Federal Republic, and the breakaway of Pakistan occurred, the unified, though not unitary, federal structure of India remained, as the leaders of the country insisted that the principalities’ pretensions to autonomy, Hyderabad’s for example, should not be tolerated. The Dutch quickly gave way to Indonesian pressures for a unitary state. (The Americans, in the context of the Cold War were willing to tolerate an independent Pakistan, as India declared itself both democratic socialist, neutralist and planned economy state).

But what was common to the experiences of both Indonesia and India, was the existence of non-state political institutions devoted, well before independence, the articulation of national (as they defined them), unified political parties or national liberation fronts, across the geographical territories, committed to unification, and ready to assume office as majority national governments, irrespective of considerations of linguistic, religious or cultural differences and other potential splittist tendencies. This, of course was the formula of the original Federalist orientation in the United States (a kind of national government), and fast-forwarding to contemporary South Africa, was, in large measure, the formula for a prepared handover of power to the African National Congress, a formula which is about to face the test of time.

It can hardly be said, in spite of the indigenous commitments of Montego Bay Conference, that the federal parties which emerged in the West Indies in preparation for the Federal elections had such characteristics – there is no evident glue here of India’s Congress or Sukarno’s PNI (Partai Nasional Indonesia). No doubt this is so for obvious reasons, including the separate autonomous political cultures of our separated islands moving (if moving at all) in island nationalist terms to whatever was to come after colonialism. Mordecai makes the point well:

“Both the W.I.F.L.P and the D.L.P. were contrived in expediency – both lacking distinct foundations in doctrine, traditional themes and standards around which leaders of the

territorial parties, so diverse in pattern and status, could rally. The fact of each alliance being headed by the founders of the two Jamaica parties for twenty years at 'war' with each other, also contributed to the weakness of both Federal Parties. The heads of the Eastern Caribbean Governments saw the attitudes imposed on them by Manley or by Bustamante on Federal matters, as merely incidental to positional plays in the Jamaica struggle".(pp.85-6)

Add to this Mordecai's reporting that the WIFLP, which at its founding, had declared itself a "socialist party", had initially rejected the application of Williams' PNM for membership of the WIFLP, on the grounds that it did not describe itself as socialist, only to accept it after the PNM's accession to power.

In effect there was no solidarist political glue, binding the national parties to each other in a federal structure. So there was little basis for the progressive articulation of inter-island political solidarity, a situation complicated by the 'technical wars' over economic policy that often, in the case of the ruling Federal party for example, pitted the ruling party of Jamaica against the ruling party of Trinidad, both being members of the same Federal Party. These factors could hardly be taken by the objective, as against the sentimentally committed-to federalism, observer as good omens.

As if this was not a difficult enough situation, speaking of course from the position of hindsight perhaps, but in the context of the political leaders' inclinations and socialised commitment (then and now) to the virtues of two party politics of the British (not of the American) kind, the results of the first Federal elections could themselves then be taken by the victorious party as a justification for rule solely by itself, in spite of indications that a contrary approach might be advisable. Mordecai states the facts of that situation:

"The ruling parties in Jamaica and Trinidad, led by Mr Manley and Dr Williams respectively [neither of whom contested the federal elections] suffered crushing defeats....Sir Alexander's victory in securing twelve of the seventeen Jamaica seats, however overstated the majority which supported him at the polls. His J.L.P. secured 54% of a poll representing 53% of listed voters, while Mr Manley's P.N.P. took 46%.... In Trinidad, the P.N.M.'s defeat [was] four to six at the hands of the D.L.P....although the P.N.M. secured some 10,000 more votes than it had done in 1956, and raised its share of the poll from 35% to 45%....In Barbados, the surprise was less in the result than in the fact that less than 26% of the listed voters went to the polls. Inclement weather was later offered as the explanation" .(pp.86-7)

We can, in my view, read into this a result that really made neither of the parties particularly happy with the electorates' responses to their entreaties.

The main consequence of this, what we can describe as this topsy-turvy pattern of voting and result was, we can see, a serious imbalance in terms of who was to govern, and who, according to the two-party, first past the post system, was not to get a chance to govern. The smaller countries' parties committed to the WIFLP had the majority of representatives elected to the new parliament, though Eric Gairy's party (he subsequently of 'floating votes' fame), and Joshua's party, held sway in St Vincent and Grenada respectively. Neither of them had been deemed to be 'socialist' and therefore WIFLP-compatible. Jamaica and Trinidad parties in the new parliament found themselves in a de facto minority, and in a Parliament where the numbers were 22 to 20 with Gairy's votes up for bargaining.

The point that I would make here (Conclusion No 2), perhaps again from hindsight, is that looked at objectively, these numbers suggested the formation of a federal coalition government in the first round of the federal experience, in a federation committed in that first round, to putting aside, for the time being, the issues on which there had been continual dispute. For in the "majority rules" parliament that eventuated, the nationalist opponents of Federation particularly in Jamaica (but some too in Trinidad), and the floating voter enthusiasts, were able to keep the fires burning as, within the ruling party itself, the disputes got hotter and hotter. The contentions weakened the Federal administration, making it look as the less attractive of two choices: federal independence or national independence. So I argue, in dealing not this time, with what caused the Federation to fail, but in dealing with what might have given it a slim chance of success, that a national government – a federal coalition - might have been helpful in that regard.

But this was not to be. The British political formula was too ingrained, a situation which has become even more the case as the years have gone by, and as the stakes of holding office have become higher and higher, and often more beneficial.

I finally conclude with a question: Can it be said with any real confidence, as we recall all the arguments about customs union, internal free trade, oil refineries, freedom of movement that seemed so contentious in 1958-61, and which broke or were used to break the federation, but which in large measure seem to remain today, that the development economics policies pursued by the nationalist island or state governments subsequent to 1962, have left us any better off than a federalist system might have?

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