

MEMORANDUM
ON
CONSTITUTIONAL
CHANGE IN FIJI

APRIL, 1965.

The European members of the Legislative Council present for the consideration of the people of Fiji a memorandum containing a series of assessments rising from wide-ranging discussions among European electors.

The members are confident that these assessments represent overwhelmingly the views of a great majority of the European electorate.

They believe, too, that the principles for which the memorandum contends will find acceptance amongst thinking people of all races in the Colony.

When endorsing the arguments contained in the memorandum the European members draw attention to the circumstances leading to the current constitutional discussions.

The proposal for a conference in London was made in the Secretary of State's dispatch of August 15, 1963.

The dispatch was essentially a response to an offer made by the Fijian Affairs Board in its letter of January 17, 1963 to Mr. Nigel Fisher, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies.

The members of the board stated that subject to the satisfactory solution of certain issues raised in the letter they would be prepared to initiate, in co-operation with the other principal races, further moves towards internal self-government.

The Secretary of State's dispatch stated inter alia -

"The British Government accept that the time is approaching when the future relationship between Fiji and Britain should be clarified and codified, and will be glad, in consultation with representatives of the people of Fiji, to work out a constitutional framework which will preserve a continuing link with Britain and within which further progress can be made in the direction of internal self-government".

Clearly the objectives contemplated by the board and by the Secretary of State were modest, the MLCs point out, adding: It is well that this fact be borne in mind in any discussion of constitutional change, in Fiji or in London.

MEMORANDUM ON CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

This memorandum does not attempt to cover all aspects of possible constitutional change. It is concerned primarily with stating the strong case for maintaining the communal system of representation in the Legislature of Fiji, and for maintaining parity of European representation, because of the special considerations which outweigh arguments based on relative numerical strength.

OVER-RIDING AIMS

There is a danger that constitutional change will be sought by the Government of Fiji or the Colonial Office merely for the sake of change.

The standards applied will not be the special requirements of Fiji. The arguments will be:

- (a) This is the pattern that has been followed elsewhere.
- or (b) This is required to appease the anti-colonialists in the United Nations.

We should insist that:

- (a) Any major change proposed for Fiji should be judged, and decided upon, only in the light of Fiji's special circumstances and special requirements, and only in accordance with the freely determined and expressed wish of the people of Fiji.
- (b) There should be as little disturbance of the present situation as possible.

If change is gradual and made following full consideration and explanation to the people of Fiji it is possible for successive positions acceptable to all sections to be reached.

Drastic change is more likely to have in it elements that are not acceptable to some sections, and so will provide everlasting causes for friction.

- (c) The basic aim of any constitutional change should be increased prosperity for Fiji through economic stimulus.

Every proposal should be judged by the degree to which it furthers this aim.

Nothing should under any circumstances be done which could possibly have the effect of discouraging advantageous investment or lessening the supply or availability of skilled knowledge in the fields of agriculture, industry or effective marketing.

Jobs and assured income for Fiji's growing population are more important for the people of Fiji than any political change just for the sake of change or because of outside pressure.

COMMUNAL REPRESENTATION

The system of equal Fijian, European and Indian representation is well-established in Fiji in the Legislative Council and in local government.

It is accepted by, and known to, the people of the Colony.

It works, and works well, as a practical system of government in Fiji where no political party divisions have emerged.

It accepts realistically the fact that there are differences of custom, language, religion, and to some extent of interest, among the various races of Fiji, and it provides a practical way of harmonising these differences through people working together in orderly good-will.

It produces no fear of racial (or any other) domination. On the contrary it removes any ground for such fears.

In Fiji, it is a proved and accepted method of providing the checks and balances needed in any stable system of government:

The amount of capital and know-how available within Fiji is not sufficient to produce the economic development which alone can provide work for, and raise the standard of living of, the Colony's people (or even maintain existing standards in face of the growing population).

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It is essential to continue to supplement local resources by continuing to draw money, equipment and experience from overseas.

Investors are particularly sensitive to anything that could produce political uncertainty. They are attracted by stability, but they will not set up or expand industries or put money into agricultural enterprises in a country whose political future is uncertain and where discord could occur.

If the existing, familiar, accepted, proved system of representation which now gives political stability to Fiji were to be suddenly and radically changed, the invaluable advantages listed above could be placed in jeopardy and there would be no compensating advantages for the Colony's people as a whole.

GRADUAL CHANGE

The present Legislative Council members were not elected or chosen with any radical constitutional change in view. They have no authority to try to bring about such change.

There is no evidence of demand for great change (other than more adequate representation of minorities) except from a section (only a section) of Indians; mainly politicians.

The aim of these politicians is widely feared to be to obtain legislative control of Fiji. The bitter effects of attempted political domination based on race have been made clear in British Guiana. This is something to be avoided at all costs in Fiji.

PARITY OF REPRESENTATION

(In considering this section, it is important to remember that "European" means all Fiji people of full or part European descent).

The advantages of communal representation listed in the previous section arise primarily from the fact that the three groups are the same size.

There can be small variations (for instance, as in the Suva City Council, the addition of nominated Chinese and Rotuman representatives), but the fundamental strength of communal representation as a practical system in Fiji lies in the equal strength of the three main groups.

Numbers are not the only criterion to be applied. In the main, the greatest degree of skill and experience in management and direction of industrial, agricultural and commercial enterprises and in the processes of government is to be found in Fiji at present among Europeans.

(It is noteworthy that when the Natural Resources Council was chosen this year, the members were predominantly European. This arose in no way from any racial consideration, but because the most suitable men available were to be found among Europeans)

Europeans who come to live in Fiji are generally easily and willingly assimilated, and are active in community affairs, and have sincerity of purpose in seeking to further the welfare of Fiji through stability, economic development and opportunity, and the application of principles and standards based on the Christian tradition.

Europeans and European companies form the largest tax-paying group in Fiji.

The greatest investment in agriculture, mining and industry is European. There has also been much European investment in forestry, shipping and commerce. Full weight should be given to the interests of those who have invested in Fiji and have continued to plough back profits into the Colony.