REFLECTION

The Caribbean Advisory Group: A Memoir

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Abstract: In 1997 the newly elected New Labour Government in the UK decided to review British policy to the Caribbean. In the course of its review it proposed and established a Caribbean Advisory Group (CAG) made up of persons with experience and expertise in the Caribbean to help frame policy towards the region. This article sets out the work undertaken by the CAG from its inception in 1998 until to 2001. It is written by one of its members and sets out the issues that were considered and the recommendations that were made. It concludes with an assessment of the work of the CAG and how it operated within the context of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office where the CAG was regarded as a not entirely welcome innovation in policy.

Keywords: New Labour Government, British Policy to the Caribbean, Caribbean Advisory Group, Foreign and Commonwealth Office

The main perspective through which the United Kingdom's relationship with the Caribbean has been viewed is one of declining interest and increasing distance as the process of decolonisation has steadily reduced the UK’s responsibilities and commitments to now a handful of Caribbean ‘overseas territories’. In essence, this is correct except it overlooks occasional short periods of re-engagement with the Caribbean which have temporarily halted the pace of decline and introduced new elements to the UK-Caribbean relationship.¹ One such period can be seen with the return of the New Labour government in 1997 after eighteen years of
Conservative rule. New Labour sought to restructure its relationship with the Caribbean, including its overseas territories, and one of the mechanisms by which it sought to do so was the Caribbean Advisory Group (CAG). I was a member of the CAG from 1998-2001.

The creation of a reinvigorated relationship with the Caribbean by New Labour was not the product of any carefully thought out strategy but rather the consequence of several developments that produced such an outcome. Matters involving the Caribbean did not start well. Shortly after his election as the new British prime minister in May 1997, Tony Blair was approached to see if he would come to Jamaica to accept an honorary degree from The University of the West Indies (UWI) to mark the fiftieth anniversary of its founding. He declined on the grounds he was too busy. He also could not find time to meet formally with Caribbean leaders in the margins of the Commonwealth Heads of Government conference held in Edinburgh in October 1997 and, to add insult to injury as far as Caribbean High Commissioners in London were concerned, he said he could not meet with the then Jamaican prime minister, P.J. Patterson when he visited London on behalf of CARICOM to raise crucial Caribbean matters with him. The dismay and ill-feeling this aroused was further compounded by the perception that New Labour were taking for granted the votes of some 600,000 persons of Caribbean origin and descent resident in the UK who had traditionally overwhelmingly voted for the Labour Party. The answer by New Labour to retrieve lost ground was twofold: (a) the creation of a Caribbean Forum where the foreign ministers of the UK and Caribbean governments would meet every two years to review relations; and (b) the creation of the Caribbean Advisory Group in London to advise the UK government on its relations with the region.

The CAG met for the first time on 22 July 1998 and held its last meeting on 22 November 2001. In between it met on eighteen occasions (approximately every two months). Its original membership was fourteen to which one other was added. The majority were of West Indian origin and the largest occupational category were academics with significant and ongoing research interests in the Caribbean. The CAG’s first Chair was Baroness Scotland, a lawyer born in Dominica. On Baroness Scotland’s appointment to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in the Summer of 1999 the Chair was taken over by Lady Hollick as Vice-Chair and from May 2000 by Sir Herman Ouseley (born in Guyana),
a former Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality. The CAG reported to the minister in the FCO with responsibility for the Caribbean which in the beginning was Baroness Symons, then Baroness Scotland (an example of the poacher turned gamekeeper), and at the end Baroness Amos (born in Guyana).

The terms of reference were considered, on a draft from Baroness Symons, at its first two meetings and slightly amended. They were as follows:

Advise Her Majesty's Government (HMG) on opportunities for further cooperation in the areas of health, education, social affairs, media and sport;

Help promote economic and business links between the two communities;

Facilitate information exchange and promote awareness of the Caribbean in the UK;

Provide HMG with ideas to advance Britain's relations with the Caribbean, taking into account the views of the British Caribbean community and monitoring the Caribbean contribution to British life;

Look for new ways of consolidating and building on the relationship between the UK and the Caribbean.

The remit of the group was therefore fairly wide but it was confirmed that it would not concern itself with the problems of the remaining British Caribbean dependent territories unless they had impact on wider Caribbean concerns. The focus was therefore to be on the independent Commonwealth Caribbean, although again not to the exclusion of other Caribbean countries when broader issues were under consideration.

The earliest meetings concentrated on establishing the relationship with the FCO and securing the resources needed to promote its work. The CAG was the only region-wide advisory group in the FCO and therefore was working without a precedent. It wanted to establish a working but also ‘arms-length’ relationship with the FCO so that it could be confidentially critical of its policies. At the same time the FCO wanted to use the CAG as a means to engage with the UK based Caribbean community in order to associate them with New Labour's policies of profiling the Caribbean. These two different objectives were the occasion of in-
built tension with FCO officials and the minister who naturally were not happy with criticisms of policy, particularly when the CAG had no privileged access to FCO documents, while the CAG felt it was being used as a channel by the UK government to sell UK policy on the Caribbean to interested parties when it was not necessarily wholly convinced of that policy. These matters were never resolved.

The other early issues were resources and commitment. All the CAG members had full time positions and demanding workloads. It was therefore agreed that while the group would meet every two months as a whole it would establish four working sub-groups which would examine policies and produce reports for consideration of the whole. These were: (1) for education and social issues (2) business links (3) international relations and (4) administration and new initiatives. The sub-groups would meet and liaise with officials in the FCO and more often with officials in other government departments and various outside bodies. They were therefore regarded as the principal engines of work in the CAG. The CAG negotiated a sum of £50,000 a year from the FCO to fund its activities which included, in addition to expenses and payments for reports, a dedicated office and a full time secretary answerable to it. The FCO allocated additional responsibilities to one of the members of its Caribbean section to liaise with the CAG and facilitate its work, particularly with the FCO. This included informing or briefing the CAG of the outcome of its recommendations to the FCO at the conclusion of its meetings. Lastly, it was agreed that the Chair of CAG would be the key person to meet from time to time with the FCO minister for the Caribbean to report on the CAG's activities and raise issues. Two reports were submitted to the minister outlining the work of the CAG, the first for the period July 1998-July 1999 and the second July 1999-May 2001.

The most active of the sub-groups was that for educational and social issues. In its first year it examined issues relating to full cost fees for Commonwealth Caribbean students, a possible revival of the Caribbean Students’ Association, student visas, and opportunities for links and exchanges between the voluntary sector and the Caribbean. In the second and third years it pressed for an increase in the number of Chevening scholarships for the region, the restoration of the British Council office in Jamaica, and met with Rex Nettleford the Vice Chancellor of UWI to consider ways to support the £10 million endowment fund appeal for UWI.
It also commissioned in 2001 a detailed report on ‘Educational Exchanges Programmes and Other Links between the UK and the Caribbean’ focused on the non-university sector. On delivery the report showed a number of limited initiatives and short exchanges between educational establishments in the UK and the Caribbean in a number of areas but no coherent strategy to develop a programme. The report suggested how this might be done.

The business links sub-group focused in the first year on meeting with many of the governmental and non-governmental organisations involved in promoting trade in the Caribbean. It also considered the question of competitiveness for Caribbean firms and explored ways to promote links with the Caribbean by small ‘black businesses’ in the UK. In the second and third years some of the initial momentum was lost but it lobbied the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) to maintain and increase its activities with the Caribbean, garnered support for Caribbean Expo 2001, and supported the proposal from the Hull Chamber of Commerce to establish a British-Caribbean Chamber of Commerce to promote UK-Caribbean trade. The problem the sub-group kept encountering was the presence of long-established groups in this sector with their own programmes of work such as the West India Committee (later Caribbean Council for Europe) and the Caribbean Trade Advisory Group who saw no need for the CAG to involve itself in business relations or worse saw it as some form of rival. It was also trying to promote a British small black business sector which was largely indifferent to opportunities in the Caribbean and in most instances too weak to do much more than survive.

The international relations sub-group never formally established a separate working practice but rather its members took the lead in bringing topical issues of importance for discussion to the whole group when it met as a group and in collective meetings with the Caribbean High Commissioners and officials in the FCO. Among the issues discussed were Caribbean debt, the complex of trade negotiations in which the Caribbean was involved and in particular those for a successor Lomé Convention, drug trafficking and money laundering, the shipment of nuclear fuels for reprocessing in the UK through the Caribbean, and the issue of disadvantages facing small states along with the adoption of a vulnerability index. I was particularly involved in lobbying for the last since I was the lead consultant for the 1997 Commonwealth Secretariat report on small states and active in the follow up work on the development of a vulnerability index. On this issue there
was a clear division between the FCO and the UK Department for International Development (DFID). The FCO gave some support to a vulnerability index but DFID was implacably opposed, largely on the grounds that it had the potential to divert resources from the poorest states to middle income states so undermining its principal aid focus which was aid to the poorest. When the two clashed, the FCO deferred claiming that DFID had the lead on this matter and so that was the end of the story. The CAG did not accept this but was unable to make any further progress on the issue.

The fourth sub-group only met as the occasion required such as establishing the CAG, organising the involvement of the CAG in the second UK-Caribbean Forum in London in 2000 or to follow up on other initiatives. Some of these were the up-ratings of payment of UK pensions to returning retirees for all the Commonwealth Caribbean countries, the deportation of criminals back to the Caribbean once they had finished their sentence in the UK without informing Commonwealth Caribbean governments in advance, and the participation of the Caribbean community in the UK in the planned Millennium celebrations. There were also issues associated with the publication of the MacPherson report into relations between the police and the Caribbean community in London. The CAG also commissioned a study in February 2000 on 'Reporting the Caribbean in Britain' which examined the low news coverage of the Caribbean in the UK and suggested ways it could be improved. The CAG followed this up with a special meeting with UK media representatives who had a particular interest in the Caribbean, including the BBC.

The CAG also met with the Caribbean High Commissioners in London. The first meeting took place in December 1998. The High Commissioners urged that attention be given by the CAG to the poor state of dialogue between the UK government and the Commonwealth Caribbean. The first UK/Caribbean Forum in the Bahamas in February 1998 had improved matters with the FCO but other government departments such as the Home Office and the DTI were still difficult. They then raised issues they wanted the CAG to address such as education, vulnerability, disaster relief, drugs, debt, trade and the WTO, and the proposal to open a Caribbean heritage centre in the UK. The second meeting was held in May 1999. It was focused on trade issues and especially the problem of bananas. The High Commissioners again drew attention to the continuing problem of access to the UK government stating that when Caribbean heads of government visited the UK they were
often fobbed off with meetings with low-ranking FCO officials. They also noted that Prime Minister Tony Blair was still to meet with any Caribbean head of government. The third meeting was in December 1999. The issues raised included the vulnerability of small states, Caribbean trade and especially the threat to Caribbean sugar and bananas, index-linked pensions, visas for Caribbean footballers to play in the UK, and the transportation of nuclear waste through the Caribbean. The fourth in April 2000 discussed the paper on reporting the Caribbean in the UK that the CAG had commissioned, the Millennium celebrations and the Caribbean, and the position of the British Council in the Caribbean. The fifth and final was held in December 2000. At this the High Commissioners expressed their dissatisfaction at the report from the Wilton Park conference on the Caribbean held in October 2000 at which several CAG members were present. In particular they criticised the discussion there of the environment which they thought ignored the work the Caribbean was already doing in this area. They also raised issues concerning educational links with the Caribbean and the development of EXPO 2001 to market the Caribbean in London. The CAG also met as a group with trade advisers from the Barbados, Guyanese and Jamaican High Commissions in April 1999.

It is difficult to gauge the impact of these meetings on the UK government or for the Caribbean High Commissioners. On several occasions Baroness Symons and then Baroness Scotland briefly attended to open or close the meeting and duly praised the efforts of the CAG. The issues raised by the High Commissioners were discussed in the sub-groups and representations about them made by the CAG to the FCO. But it is difficult to point to any one instance when any of this resulted in any changes in policy. The CAG sub-groups found it difficult to work with officials in the High Commissions outside the framework of these formal meetings suggesting that the Caribbean High Commissions saw the CAG primarily as another medium through which to get their message to the UK government, which any way had already heard it. In retrospect it is clear that the Caribbean High Commissioners saw value in the CAG in that they continued to meet regularly with it but were uncertain how to deal with it given its existence as a group involved in ‘para-diplomacy’ and therefore outside the normal diplomatic framework. In the meantime most of the CAG reluctantly came to the conclusion that the High Commissions were not serious in their dealings with them and as such not easy to work with.
Lastly, the CAG met with and were briefed by officials from the FCO and other government departments. The first and most comprehensive meeting was in November 1998 and involved FCO officials from the Latin American and Caribbean Department, the European Union Department, the Economic Relations Department and the Drugs and International Crime Department. Short presentations were also made by DFID, the DTI and the Ministry of Defence. The subjects covered included aid, disaster relief, private investment, the Lomé negotiations, bananas, debt, trade and industry, and drugs and international crime. The briefings were cited as confidential but the material supplied was of the type available to anyone with a real interest in the Caribbean or a subscription to Caribbean Insight. That said the briefings did collectively provide a comprehensive and insightful review of issues in the Commonwealth Caribbean from a technical viewpoint, but there was a real reluctance by officials to discuss political issues. On later occasions the CAG was briefed by officials from the FCO’s Planning Department and its Cultural Relations Department and by the head of the Caribbean Department in DFID. Baroness Scotland also met with the UK High Commissioners based in The Bahamas, Barbados, Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago when they were in London in April 1999 for their annual meeting on the Caribbean. As Chair of CAG she also visited the Caribbean to attend the CARICOM Heads of Government meeting in July 1999.

The high point of the formal involvement of the CAG in formal foreign affairs was the Second UK/Caribbean Forum held in London in May 2000. The CAG began discussing their involvement at the end of 1999 and were briefed by Baroness Scotland in January 2000. She set out a draft programme. It covered a broad range of themes and envisaged the involvement of ministers from other UK government departments as well as the UK Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook. The CARICOM foreign ministers were expected to attend as well as senior figures from the UK Caribbean Overseas Territories. The US, the EU and Canada were to be invited as observers. The initial response of the CAG was that most of the programme would not interest the Caribbean community in the UK and that they were in danger of being overlooked or excluded. It set this out in a note to Baroness Scotland after the meeting and again in its meeting in March. In the event this was taken on board through an invitation to a select list of prominent members of the Caribbean community in the UK to attend the official reception at No. 10 Downing Street the evening before the opening of the
Sir Herman Ouseley as Chair of CAG spoke at the Forum on ‘The Integration of Minorities’ and other members of the CAG attended various sessions.

The UK government thought the Forum a success and believed it had gone a long way to mend the rift in UK-Commonwealth Caribbean relations. The CAG however felt it had been ‘somewhat lacklustre and disappointing’. It thought that the involvement of the Caribbean community in the UK was minimal and that more could have been done to include them. It also thought that the exclusion of Cuba from the Forum sent the wrong message at a time when Cuba was slowly opening up and introducing reforms. Finally it noted that there had been very little press coverage of the Forum in the UK (and as it turned out not much in the Caribbean as well!). The Chair of the CAG wrote to the minister setting out these points.

The UK government called an election in June 2001. At the outset it had been agreed that CAG would exist only for the lifetime of the parliament and therefore its activities were suspended. Sir Herman Ouseley also indicated he would not continue as Chair. At the beginning of November the new minister for the Caribbean, Baroness Amos, wrote to members of the CAG inviting them to a meeting at the end of the month to discuss the future of the CAG. At the meeting Baroness Amos stated that the FCO had concluded that the CAG had an important role in advising it on policy and in helping it to establish and maintain contact with Caribbean communities in Britain so the question was how best to move forward. A review was under way to inform policy. For its part the CAG reported some of the problems it had encountered in its work and subsequent to the meeting submitted some suggestions to the minister on how it could function more effectively. Among its recommendations was a call for more resources to employ a pro-active executive secretary able to undertake research and a Chair of Caribbean origin able to devote at least one day a week to the group. It also called for additional members to cover culture, sport and youth.

Baroness Amos wrote for a final time to members of the CAG in March 2002 stating that the future of the CAG was still under consideration and she was assessing options. The one that was taken was to restructure the CAG and change its name to the Caribbean Board. No one from CAG was appointed to the new Caribbean Board. The FCO was now to co-chair the Board and its
remit and membership shifted to focus more extensively on the involvement of the Caribbean community in the UK in its affairs.

These revisions show that the FCO saw value in the CAG but not in the way it operated. It clearly saw the independence of the CAG as a problem and always wanted to put a ‘steer’ on its activities. On its part the CAG valued its independence and in part saw its role as a ‘friendly critic’ and alternative source of policy advice to the minister. The FCO officials were not comfortable with this fact as correspondence between them and the CAG as to the availability of the minister to meet the CAG clearly shows. The result, particularly as the activities of the CAG grew, was frustration among many of its members summarised in an e-mail from one of them in early 2001:

I think we (CAG) have not had a great deal of influence, that our advice is not likely to be listened to unless it accords with HMG policy (this has been particularly the case in terms of educational issues, but it applies across the board) and we are not consulted by the government on Caribbean issues as often as we would like. Ironically, it seems that our expertise is more often drawn upon by non-governmental groups for advice or contacts in the region … We are all busy and it is sometimes difficult for us to devote much time to CAG work. Nevertheless, we do have a considerable collective expertise and our voices should be heard without having to adopt the tactics of a lobby group.

I would concur with this assessment. The e-mail goes on to state that the CAG needed to raise its profile and have a thorough review of its activities. This recognises that the group had weaknesses which it needed to address. However, what the e-mail did not consider and what in hindsight seems to have been the real question is whether the CAG would ever have been able to achieve what it set out to do. It was an innovation in a government department that was confident that it knew best. The FCO had a history and a particular tradition of working to which the existence of the CAG was a challenge. Over time the FCO developed ways to contain the influence of the group and in the end was able to ensure that the successor Caribbean Board would not have as much independence as the CAG had to set its agenda. In the end the Caribbean Board itself was dissolved.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

Dr Paul Sutton is an academic and consultant specialising in the study of the Caribbean and of small states and territories. He recently retired as
Senior Professor in Caribbean Studies at the Caribbean Studies Centre of London Metropolitan University. He was formerly at the University of Hull, where he taught from 1973-2004. He was a Research Student at the Institute of International Relations in Trinidad from 1972-1973 and Visiting Professor at Florida International University in Miami, USA in 1993. He was Visiting Professor at Florida International University in Miami, USA in 1993. He is the author/editor of ten books and more than sixty chapters, articles and papers, with a focus on the Caribbean, small states and the development policy of the European Union. His most recent books are Modernising the State: Public Sector Reform in the Commonwealth Caribbean (published by Ian Randle in 2006) and (with Kate Quinn) Politics and Power in Haiti (Palgrave Macmillan 2013). Dr Sutton has been a consultant to the West Indian Commission, the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Caribbean Council for Europe, the European Centre for Development Policy Management (Maastricht) and the Government of the Netherlands (on Caribbean related issues), among others. He has given evidence on the Caribbean to the Foreign Affairs Committee and to the Overseas Development Committee of the House of Commons. He was a member of the Caribbean Advisory Group 1997-2001, appointed by the British government to advise on policy to the Caribbean and a member of the Caribbean Study Group at the Royal Institute of International Affairs. He also helped to establish and from 2008-11 was Chair of the UK Chapter of the British-Caribbean Chamber of Commerce located in Hull and Trinidad. Dr Sutton is a founder member and former Chair of the Society for Caribbean Studies, which promotes the academic study of the Caribbean in the UK and the European Union. He continues to research and lecture on the Caribbean and small states and is a frequent visitor to the Caribbean. He has lectured at all three campuses of the University of the West Indies and at the Caribbean Development Bank.

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2 It was a long-established practice that the British prime minister would find time to meet a Commonwealth Caribbean prime minister visiting London on urgent business involving the Commonwealth Caribbean. On these matters see Sir Ron Sanders 'Tony Blair and the Caribbean', 18 May 2007.
3 The original members were: Patricia Scotland, Arif Ali (publisher), Floella Benjamin (actress), Jim Braithwaite (businessman), Mary Chamberlain (academic), Oliver Foot (businessman), Alistair Hennessy (academic), Sue Hollick (journalist), Ermal Kirby (cleric), Mike McLeod (academic), Tony Payne (academic), Patsy Roberson (international civil servant), Paul Sutton (academic), and Ansel Wong (educational management). It was later briefly joined by Wilford Wood (cleric).

Wilton Park operates as the FCO’s ‘think tank’ and the conferences focus on current international affairs. I was involved in organising the 2000 conference and attended on behalf of the CAG.

One is reminded of the comment by Gordon Lewis that in colonial times the invitation to the Governor’s party was the pinnacle of success in the West Indies. I was at a packed reception which was attended by Tony Blair and addressed by him standing on a chair.