

SUGGESTS UNION OF BRITISH WEST INDIES

Grouping for Increased Financial Strength, Mutual Help, Defence and Development

BY A. T. DRUMMOND, LL.D.

PART I.

Under the conditions brought about by the war, it has become suggestively important, wherever the situation is favorable, to have the scattered colonies and dependencies of Great Britain politically grouped for the purposes of increased financial strength, mutual help and defence and internal development. The cable, wireless telegraphy and quick transportation by land and by water have greatly facilitated this. Thus British Guiana, the British West Indies and British Honduras, which here will be included under the general term, British West Indies, impress us as being a conveniently situated group of 15 crown colonies, which should, in their own interest, as well as those of the empire, be politically united under one government. The subject is here discussed with a knowledge of the obstacles which Royal Commissions on the West Indian situation in past years, have found in the way of federation, but, in the belief that with the throwing open freely of the rapidly enlarging Canadian markets to British West Indian raw products, the groundlessness of the fear entertained in Jamaica and other islands, that the United States might retaliate were much reciprocal freedom given; and the new spirit of optimism with which, since the war began, we have approached all Imperial problems, such obstacles will largely, if not entirely, disappear. Under these more promising convictions, the suggestions now made have been placed before both the Imperial and the Canadian governments.

Identity of Interests.

Among these tropical colonies there is a large identity of interest in respect of the products of the soil, climatic conditions, trade outlook and connections, character of the people and methods of government. Any proposals advantageous to one, would be, in a relative measure, almost equally advantageous to the others, whether these proposals involve constitutional changes, were promotive of increased internal production, or would result in expansion of trade. In British Guiana, the mineral resources include gold, and some iron, mercury, antimony, plumbago and even diamonds, but they are known in somewhat general terms, and await prospecting and capital for development, whilst in British Honduras the belief is prevalent that in its back country, important minerals will be found. Presently, however, of greater importance is the fact, that, on both the mainland and the islands, the agricultural possibilities are enormous, and need capital, a larger guiding hand of Anglo-Saxons, and suitable labor in developing such abundant returns as to make the British Empire almost independent of foreign countries in all the numerous American tropical and semi-tropical fruits, and afford a great source of supply in such important products as sugar, coffee, rice, rubber, balata, copra, cocoa, cotton and various tropical structural, cabinet and dye woods, whilst there is an important future on the savannahs of British Guiana, and, it is claimed, also in British Honduras, for cattle. In these two mainland colonies, not much more than 1 per cent. of their total area is under cultivation, whilst on nearly all of the islands the respective governments have large available acreages for disposal.

Federation of West Indies.

Federation of these colonies can be viewed from the standpoints of concentration of authority, external trade, internal development, and, to some extent, strategical importance to the navy, but these standpoints are somewhat interdependent.

With the affairs of these colonies presently administered by 15 governors, administrators and commissioners, and probably 75 or more high officials appointed to the executive and legislative councils, a federal union, whilst probably resulting in some economy of administration, would effect a concentration of authority and an ease of control which does not now exist; would better attract intellect, population and capital for the development of its resources; would have a

much higher status and much better opportunity than the individual colonies have in trade and other relations with the different parts of the empire and with foreign countries; and, as a new unit in the empire with large resources and future promise would be an added strength to Great Britain. In securing development of its resources, the great financial and economic strength and prestige of a federation can necessarily accomplish what its individual colonies would be quite unable to effect. It can at any time successfully concentrate its efforts on any needed public developments in any part of the federation, whether it be, as in this case, on such necessary objects as harbor works, river channels, railways, dykes, drainage works, forest highways, or water transport; or whether it be in dealing, from its broader standpoint, with education, public health, agriculture, forest conservation, or imperial and foreign trade.

Development of Resources.

The much enlarged steamship communications which federal union and closer commercial arrangements with Canada would develop, will give additional force to the evident necessity of having great coaling stations and naval bases in proximity to the Panama Canal, the greatly preponderating use of which by British shipping has been shown by recent returns. Even now the United States government has established what its officials term "ideal naval strategic bases" at Culebra, an island off the east coast of Porto Rico, and at Guantanamo Harbor on the south-east coast of Cuba, which Captain Mahan, the United States naval expert, considers can become to that country, in the Caribbean Sea, what Gibraltar and Malta are to British interests in the Mediterranean Sea.

With regard generally to the development of the resources of the federation, what has been so successfully accomplished by British enterprise in the Malay Peninsula, under the same degrees of latitude, and where the agricultural products are somewhat similar, should be capable of attainment in the British West Indies under a federal government possessed of enterprise and a broad vision. The aggregate export and import trade of these latter colonies probably does not at present, exceed in value one hundred and fifty million dollars, but the possibilities of vastly increasing these figures by co-operative effort is no longer a dream.

And on what basis are these possibilities founded? The climate in past years has not had an enviable reputation among the people of temperate climes, but, now, with enforced sanitary regulations, proper care of the person, and the war on the mosquito breeding places, the climate has altogether lost the more serious objections raised to it. The richness of the soil on both the islands and the mainland; the semi-tropical heat counterbalanced by an abundant rainfall; and the ample opportunities afforded to the planter for insular and for mainland situations, for alluvial flats, hilly outlooks, or broad savannahs, all present a diversity of conditions suitable to great luxuriance in growth, and to a great variety of important products in common use being cultivated on a commercial scale.

Agriculture is Important.

And whilst agriculture will always be the more important development on the islands, there are in British Guiana and British Honduras dense forests with many woods valuable for cabinet, engineering and agricultural purposes, and splendid water falls which are easily available as power in working up these woods into marketable products, as well as in operating the various plants which are or can be constructed for crushing the cane, separating the rice, extracting the oil from the cocoa and cashew nuts, and other manufacturing purposes, and in facilitating the drainage, ploughing and other operations on the large plantations. Quite apart from European conceptions of the climate, there have been, in the past, certain drawbacks in the way of British West Indian advancement. The labor question has always been, more or less, a problem which has not been facilitated by each government having views of its own, and by the general lack of ambition on the part of the negro. Many sugar and other plantations were, also, not equipped with the most up-to-date methods and machinery for economical production and manufacture, and this no doubt aggravated the disaster, so widespread among the planters, when Great Britain continued for so many years to be unwilling to impose countervailing duties on European beet sugar which was being sold at low prices there and in other countries in consequence of the large