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Source: *The Black Scholar*, Vol. 11, No. 3, Latin America/The Caribbean (January/February 1980), pp. 50-58

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41067880>

Accessed: 19-09-2016 09:59 UTC

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REVOLUTION IN GRENADA: AN INTERVIEW WITH MAURICE BISHOP

On March 13, 1979, the people of Grenada, led by the People's Revolutionary Army (P.R.A.) overthrew the government of Eric Gairy. The following interview was granted by Maurice Bishop, Prime Minister of the People's Revolutionary Government of

Grenada, to Caribbean Life and Times' Grenada correspondent Alister Hughes and Special Assignment Editor John Redman. The article below was reprinted from the December 1979 issue of Caribbean Life and Times.

It was perhaps appropriate that the first questions put to Grenada's Premier concerned his introduction to Politics, Maurice Bishop said that he had first become politically conscious while he was at secondary school, the Presentation College in Grenada, particularly after he had finished his Ordinary Levels in 1960. He got heavily involved in the political activities that were available: president of the Historical Society and the Students' Council, editor of the students' newspaper and president of the Debating Society.

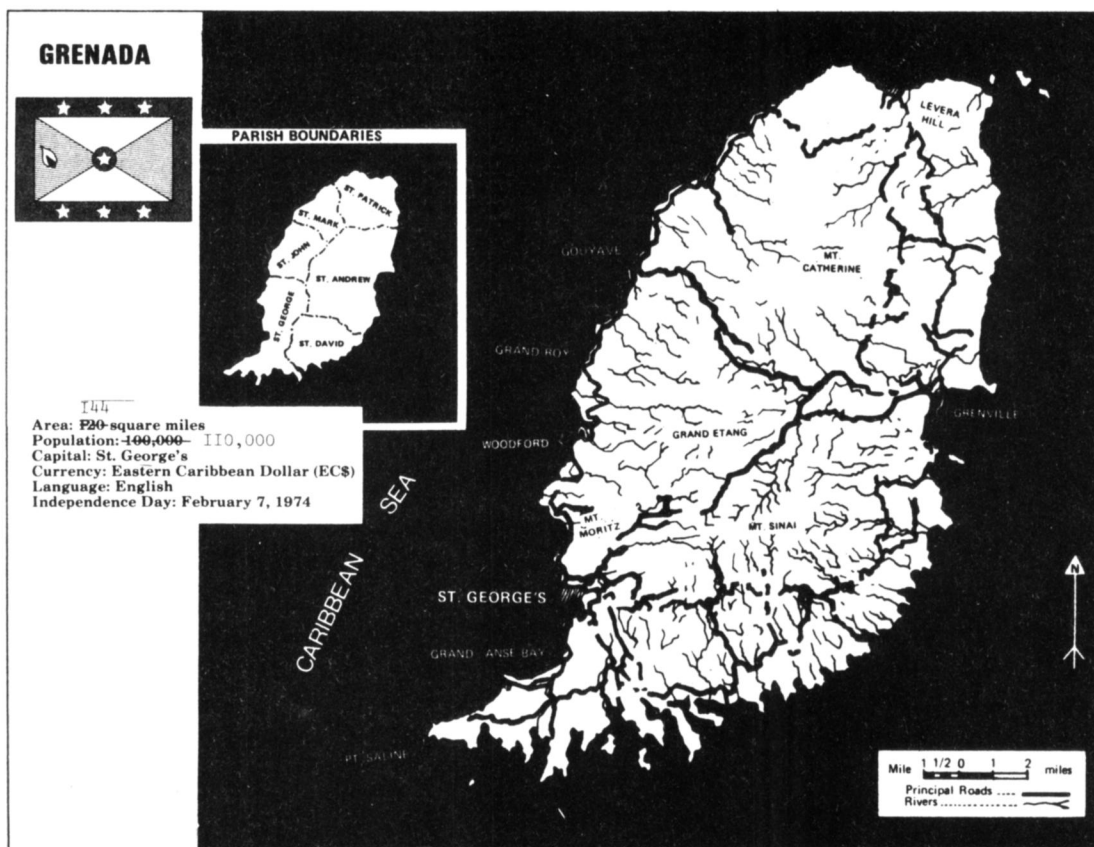
After leaving college in 1962 in the nine months prior to going to London to study law, he had been involved, along with people like Bernard Coard, in the formation of the Grenada Assembly of Youth after Truth which was intended to be a bridge between the secondary schools in the country, particularly Grenada Boys Secondary School, College, Convent and High School, the four main schools, where there was "a lot of competition in a very foolish and sectarian way."

In London in September 1963 he continued his political involvement with the West Indian Students Union and the Standing Conference of West Indian Organizations.

As to what shaped his political thinking, the Prime Minister said that there were several things. In the early 1960s there had been the independence movement: the anti-colonial movement which was picking up momentum after the independence of Ghana and the break-up of the West Indies Federation and the subsequent emergence of African and Caribbean states. They had spent that period following "the struggles in Ghana, the writings of Nkrumah, the struggles in Algeria, the situation with Ben Bella and people like that." The Cuban revolution in 1959 had been a watershed and they followed, very closely, the speeches and activities of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, in particular.

The period in England had been important, he said, as it focused in a very direct way on the whole question of racism, in practice, and helped, he thought, to develop an anti-racist perspective and to get a better feel for the problems of the working class, the poor and oppressed.

The declaration of U.D.I., in Rhodesia, had brought home to him the hypocrisy of British colonialism and the maneuverings of imperialism generally. When contrasted with the British response to Anguilla it had brought home



very forcefully how things operate in practice.

DECISIVE INFLUENCE

During the period of the emerging cultural nationalist feelings in America, the Black Power revolt of the late '60s was a fairly decisive influence in that it raised the whole question of the role of the black man.

While he thought that most of them had moved beyond cultural nationalism and had begun to identify matters more concretely in terms of class rather than race, nevertheless the racial factor at that time was very important and he did not believe that any of them would negate altogether the importance of racism as an outgrowth of capitalism and, therefore, as a continuing influence in the context of imperialism.

Questioned as to who had been his ideal as a young man, Prime Minister Maurice Bishop said that there had not been any one single person and it depended on different periods. He had concentrated at one time his attention on Frantz Fanon, and on Malcolm X, Fidel and Che, and, as he had mentioned, Nkrumah and his writings. Later they began to look more and more at the works of Lenin and many different socialist and progressive thinkers.

Had his return to Grenada indicated a new step in his political life? Prime Minister Bishop supposed so. When he had returned to Grenada in March 1970 he had passed through Trinidad during the emergence of the Black Power revolt there, with the subsequent arrest and detention of several people on Nelson Island, including Grenadian Pat Emmanuel.

They had led a demonstration in Grenada expressing solidarity with their brothers in Trinidad. Gairy's reaction had been that they had come back to be troublemakers and "hot and sweaty." He had been projected rapidly into the political sphere. If there had been no Trinidad in 1970 it might have been postponed for a year or so.

Asked to be more specific, the Prime Minister remembered a number of incidents: the first demonstrations in May 1970, and Gairy's "Black Power" speech in which he had spoken of "steel cutting steel" and "the roughest and toughest roughnecks" and "if your neighbor's house is on fire wet yours." He remembered Gairy's identification of him when he had been nominated by students of Grenada Boys' Secondary School for a Commission of Inquiry and been rejected by Gairy.

In June of that year they had begun the newspaper "Forum" named after a similarly named organization. The newspaper had lasted seven or eight months.

Later in the year he had been involved in the Nurses' Demonstration and was arrested and charged with riot and incitement to riot.

From 1971 onwards there had been the African Liberation Days, and he had been nominated and accepted as a member of the Caribbean African Liberation Support Committee. It had been the start of developing regional and international links.

At the Nurses' Demonstration 10 trial lawyers had come from outside Grenada, and it had given him an opportunity to develop links with some of the progressive professionals in the Caribbean such as Allan Alexander of Trinidad.

In March 1972 Joint Endeavour for Welfare, Education and Liberation (JEWEL) had been formed in the parish of St. David's by Unison Whiteman and

Sebastian Thomas. Later in the year others, including himself and Kendrick Radix, formed Movement for Assemblies of the People (MAP). The two organizations began to work together and in March 1973 had merged in St. David's into "The New Jewel Movement."

NEED FOR CHANGE

On the thrust of the Movement, Mr. Bishop said that they had seen themselves as a political organization and had gone around proclaiming the need for change, to revolutionize the economy, the politics and the society of the country. Their position had been very clear that people had the right to remove oppressive governments at a particular moment in time if those governments refused to respond to democratic activity or if they continued to rig elections.

"The New Jewel Movement was an unconventional type organization," he said. "It wasn't formed as an electoral political party but was formed as a political party that was more aimed at raising consciousness and with the declared intention of taking political power in or out of elections if the accepted processes did not allow for electoral change."

This position had always been made clear. At their first big convention—People's Convention on Independence—they had said they were not proclaiming an anti-position on independence, but that the people had the right to be involved in the political process leading up to independence, including what kind of constitution, what went in the constitution, what kind of government after independence, etc.

At that time they were advocating the need for a new governmental structure, essentially premised on the assemblies model. They had not pushed the idea much subsequently though the basic idea

of a new form of democracy, where you had democracy from the roots coming up, and not once in every five years for five seconds type Westminster democracy was something that was still very close to him.

In 1976 the New Jewel Movement combined with the other two political parties, the Grenada National Party and the United Peoples' Party, to form the "Alliance" to fight the 1976 election. It was not altogether a happy alliance. After the election the alliance held six seats, Gairy and his party held nine. Was Maurice Bishop at this point thinking in terms of revolution?

"Our position has always been very simple," he said, "peaceful means if possible, revolution if necessary."

Asked if at that stage it still seemed that peaceful means were possible? The Premier replied: "Oh yes, I think so."

He pointed out that despite the mass-rigging of the election, the harassment and intimidation, etc., in a situation where a repressive government wanted to maintain power through rigging, once they stuck to a certain procedure, it was nonetheless possible to catch them at their own game.

He also pointed out that more important than them feeling they could win through an election was the fact that they felt that the people felt that they could still do it by an election and therefore would not respond to a revolutionary call in the context of an armed take-over.

Over the next three years there had been further indications of Gairy's determination to hold on to power at all costs. A number of laws were passed in this period, including the Essential Services Act of 1978 which, in effect, removed the right to strike for eleven of the most important categories of workers.

BRUTAL ELEMENTS

Prime Minister Bishop said that they had begun to gather that with Gairy, in discussions with some of his more brutal elements in his police and Defense Force, outright liquidation was increasingly discussed, liquidation of the New Jewel Movement leadership.

As to when the movement had started to acquire guns, Maurice Bishop would not answer, though he did indicate he might give an answer in a year's time.

The vital spark for the revolution came in March. On Saturday, March 10, while at a meeting in St. George's, they got word that the police and the Defense Force were on their way to the homes of the leadership—Bernard Coard, Unison Whiteman, Vince Noel, Kendrick Radix and Maurice Bishop—and that the plan was to detain them after searches. Vince Noel was not at the meeting so he could not be forewarned.

"We decided to make ourselves unavailable," he said.

In hiding, on the Monday morning they got word that Gairy was leaving the country at midday and had left orders to find them and wipe them out.

"That raised right away the whole question of whether we should sit down and hope that it wasn't true or whether we should ourselves organize to make a strike. After many hours of discussion, I would say anything like between ten to one, we decided to move."

Prime Minister Bishop explained that two leading comrades were sent for and plans were laid that they should meet at the hill next to the barracks of the Defense Force that night after ten o'clock. About 46 men prepared to use arms and willing to fight were mobilized.

As the Prime Minister describes it the attack on the Defense Force barracks at True Blue was fairly unsophisticated.

Soon after 4:00 a.m. on the morning of the 13th they opened fire on the barracks. As far as the Prime Minister is aware there was no return fire. "They just took off."

From there they went to Radio Free Grenada and when the staff arrived for work put out a call to the people to respond. The call on the radio resulted in a "massive mobilization around the country."

He remembers that there was a press conference at between four and half-past-four that day and by then it was more or less over.

As to the gains, Prime Minister Bishop thought that there were a number of achievements that could be listed very easily. They had created an estimated 1000 jobs in terms of road work and additional construction work and other programs started. They had moved into the agro-industrialization area, various juices—mango, paw-paw, soursop and sapodilla—were being put out, though there were problems with the cans and labels. They had been able to get something like 109 scholarships for university education for students in Grenada. The repayment of the University of the West Indies debt had meant something like 25 students could go and the 20 students who were already there would now have their economic costs paid. Though he said he should enter a caveat on that as he understood that the university had not registered all at that point.

They had reduced school fees at secondary level to \$25 per term. The school feeding program was also an important program in their view. They had been able to get hot lunches for quite a number of primary schools and they hoped to expand on that. They hoped to integrate the Government estates into the program by getting some of the provisions from them.

"Quite frankly, I can't remember half of them at this point in time," Prime Minister Bishop admitted.

He thought it was important to see the progress they had made on the external front in terms of bringing back a certain measure of respect to the country in the short period of six and a half months in terms of what they had been able to do at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference, in terms of the Kaunda visit, in terms of the Non-Aligned Movement Conference, where, among other things, they had been elected to the bureau and where he had been chosen as one of the Vice-Presidents to the Conference.

In terms, likewise, of the Grenada Lmini-summit involving Grenada, St. Lucia and Dominica, in terms of the response they felt they had stirred in the heart and minds of Caribbean masses of the people by the revolution and, therefore, the expectation with which people took for what is being said and done in and by Grenada at that point.

He also thought there were a number of internal indications: the number of young people who were anxious to go back to school; in terms of the response of the population to their call for voluntary organization and mobilization to build back their communities and the number of Peoples' Work Brigades which had been formed around the country in response to their call—22 in the parish of St. Andrews alone—doing voluntary work on the weekends.

They felt that Gairy could not have had this effect except by coercing people because they would not have seen any point in making sacrifices, given the level of corruption and that sort of thing.

He said there was a new feeling of dignity and sense of worth, of belonging in the population for the first time. All of

these they saw as important indicators of the response of the people to the revolution.

Asked about his attitude towards the Press, the Prime Minister said: "On the Press question, our position is very clear. We do not accept the meaning of 'free and responsible Press' as interpreted by 'Torchlight' and many other papers up and down the region. We don't accept it at all."

"We do not concede any right of the Press to print or to reprint libelous and scurrilous material which they know to be untrue. The 'Torchlight' had done that on several occasions. The 'Bunte' article was a classic out of that West German magazine. They knew Grand Etang had not been deforested and roads pitched and missiles installed in the hills. They knew there was no Russian naval base in Carriacou. They knew there were no thousands, or whatever figure was used, of Cubans running around with arms, and so on."

"And, as you recall, the way in which they chose to respond after printing the article is with an Editor's note of one sentence, one and a half lines, probably, that said 'We know of the presence of some Cubans, but we cannot substantiate the other facts.' I am saying that that is a very dishonest answer."

"NO EXCUSE"

"And, it amounts to saying that, as far as you are concerned there is some truth in the article."

"Now even under conventional law, conventional legal system, leaving aside a revolutionary situation, you do not have the right to reprint libel. And, if there is a libelous article and you chose to reprint it, you remain guilty. 'Torchlight' should know that. If they don't, ignorance of the law is no excuse."

"And one of the things we had considered doing was to have all of them arrested for criminal libel, bring them before the Courts on a criminal charge."

"That hasn't happened for a number of reasons."

"That's the first thing. The second: this is that we do not concede that a free and responsible press, so called, has the right to distort news, to twist it and to falsify it. And there are hundreds of examples that I can quote, personally, out of the 'Torchlight' where that has been done."

The third thing: we do not concede that they have the right as a free and responsible press, quote unquote, once more, to print only what they want to print. We feel that the role of a press, if they call themselves a national paper and if they are free and responsible, is to print the views, once it is not libelous or scurrilous, etc., or indecent, of everybody who writes. I can show you dozens of articles that have been copied to us, the Jewel paper, that 'Torchlight' has not printed. We have had the experience on several occasions where they have also refused to print what we have sent them, right?"

"Now, these things, in our view, are not acceptable and, if you really are talking about freedom of the press, you have to overcome your prejudices to deal with certain realities. There is a revolution in the country. The revolution has made progress. There are national events taking place. If you are a serious paper, you have to carry these, whether you like it or not. And you can't be just highlighting what you want to highlight, 'Detainees Bawl Help,' or some other such thing, right, which is written from your narrow perspective of concern."

"The fourth question: we totally reject minority control of the press, totally. We do not accept that it is correct. We don't care what happens in England or

Canada. That's their business. We say in our situation we reject it completely, minority control of the press."

Elaborating on this theme, Prime Minister Bishop said that they rejected entirely D. M. B. Cromwell (the managing director) and "Trinidad Express" between them controlling "forty-something" percent of the shares of "Torchlight" because it meant that the only views you would get across consistently were the views of the "Trinidad Express" and of D. M. B. Cromwell.

"We don't want any foreign ownership of our newspapers in Grenada, and we don't want no one man ownership of no newspapers [sic] in Grenada. We reject that completely. It can only mean that the views that get reflected here are the views of that one man minority."

As to what steps the Government intended to take, Maurice Bishop felt at the time of the interview it was premature for him to go into that. (Subsequent to the interview "Torchlight" was closed down by the government.)

PEOPLE'S MANDATE

Prime Minister Bishop pointed out that in a country like England where they had spent several centuries developing their democracy—where people could sit and weigh and could see ten points of view and choose one—that it was alright, maybe. He said that in the situation of Grenada with backwardness, illiteracy, superstition, rumor mongering, certain functional illiteracy, most people could hardly even fully appreciate the one statement in front of them. "How are they going to sift up three and four?" he asked.

Asked about when his government would seek a mandate from the people through elections, Prime Minister

Bishop said: "Well, so far as mandate is concerned, quite frankly, I don't think we could have had a better mandate than the 13th of March."

He thought that the people themselves by the very fact of taking part in the revolution as they saw it provided a mandate.

He said that in terms of the Constitution itself Gairy had not been running the country under any Constitution. He had been running under the guise of constitutionality, while, in fact, ignoring everything that the Constitution required.

They felt that there was a strong sentiment in the country that was not interested in elections at this time. The people were interested in seeing the country go forward, in seeing the economy stabilized.

"I am 100 percent clear in my mind that at a minimum, the vast, vast majority of people in this country would see an election at earliest five years from 13th March," he said, "because that is how they see 13th March, as having, in effect been an election. And, therefore, even under the old system, it was every five years. And there are people who are telling us around the country, 10 years and 15 years."

"We have taken no position in anything like that, and we're still not taking any position on that."

"What we are saying very clearly is that we are willing to hold elections. We are committed to that. That remains the case. But we're not going to be stuck to any time period . . . It depends on the objective situation in the country."

He said that what they were concerned to do in the interim was to lay the basis for genuine democratization of the society, democracy from the grass roots up through the organization of people in the villages. He pointed to the Peoples'

Working Brigades as weekly democracy. He also cited the Public Health Primary Health program. This, he said, was a million times better than once-in-every-five-years-five-seconds democracy when you put an X. People for the first time would be really involved. They felt people related much more to it than "this X business."

Asked his reaction to suggestions that this was a Marxist-Leninist Government going the Marxist-Leninist road. Prime Minister Bishop said: "We say we are socialist. We have defined what we mean by socialism. We've done it 100 times. Every time we stand on a platform we are doing it. Every time we defend a particular issue we are doing it."

FUTURE GROWTH

"I know what we are. I know what I am. I call myself 'Socialist,' and I say there is a program and a policy we follow, that will tell you what we are."

On the future growth of Grenada, Prime Minister Bishop said that they were going to build the national economy around three pillars: agriculture, fisheries and tourism.

They intended to increase agricultural production to deal with the question of import substitution, saving foreign exchange which could then be used to buy all the various forms of equipment and machinery that they needed to build the economy.

In line with this they were going to expand agro-industrialization using as a base the raw materials they now produced, moving into the area of processing cocoa, in particular, but also nutmegs and bananas.

He thought the fisheries had tremendous potential which had never been exploited. The fishermen in Grenada were still fishing in 1979 just like Peter and

Paul were fishing in the Sea of Galilee in the days of Christ. They would like to move into a fisheries industry where they would have canning or salting and drying with a view to exporting, as well as providing more protein for the people. He noted they had a very good tuna bank which they were going to develop.

In the area of tourism he said the major problem was that the industry in terms of the substance of it was owned, controlled, dominated and exploited by outsiders.

He pointed out that Holiday Inn had about 60 percent of the bed space, bought most of its food from outside and exported most of its profits. He also said that it was in Grenada on a tax concession.

He said there was no linkage between the tourist economy and the rest of the economy. Tourists did not buy food from Grenada but from outside. Tourists did not buy handicrafts from Grenada, most of the handicrafts seen were made in Taiwan and Hong Kong, yet there were hundreds of very skillful handicrafts people in Grenada.

They would like to achieve vertical and horizontal linkage between the tourist economy and the rest of the economy. They would also want to bring the tourism industry under the ownership and control of the people of Grenada.

The most immediate move was not to get more hotel buildings but to raise the level of occupancy.

They had a very small tourist plant, 710 beds or thereabouts. That was one hotel in North America—could be half a hotel.

Promotion had not been very effective and, therefore, very often they operated with 35-40 percent occupancy. The first aim was to raise that.

They were also going into a national airline. They hoped in that way to get

into interlining arrangements with some of the companies flying out from America and Europe, tagging on Grenada as an extra stop.

They were also looking at the Caribbean tourist market which they felt was there and important.

WILL NOT RETURN

Part of the problem, he said, was the lack of infrastructure.

"You charge the tourist a hundred US dollars a day or a hundred and twenty a day and he pulls the chain and no water comes. He's not likely to come back," he said.

They had to deal with the water problems and other aspects of the infrastructure problem, lights, roads, etc. They intended to spend a lot of time and attention on it.

An international airport was a number one concern. He expected to be meeting Prime Minister Joe Clark in Canada the next week, and one of the things he would be raising with him was the question of the Canadian International Development Agency allocation for the feasibility study, US\$500,000, which had been promised but which apparently was frozen, and the possibility of making some contribution towards the actual building of the airport.

In terms of the structure of the economy, they saw a state sector, a cooperative sector and a private sector.

In terms of the private sector, he said, some people were getting worried because of the Coke factory issue, and other issues like that. Their position was simple. This was the 20th century. When there were enlightened businessmen who were prepared to work within rules that were reasonable, with profit margins that were reasonable and did not try and cheat, were willing to understand that

workers had rights and must be allowed to unionize once the majority expresses that wish, the Government could deal with them.

Once they got these guidelines going they saw a role for the investor, but investors had to operate with a certain set of guidelines.

On the external front, Prime Minister Bishop said that they wanted to follow a policy of non-alignment. This did not mean "neutrality" because they were committed to certain principles: anti-imperialism, anti-Zionism, anti-racism and anti-colonialism. All of these things were basic to them.

They believed that it was important, for small countries in particular, to be allowed to build their own processes in their own way, free from outside interference, free from the use or threat of force. That was one of the reasons why they were so concerned about Carter's recent speech and the tension it was going to create in the region. They saw it as an attempt to use the excuse of the Soviet combat unit in Cuba to give them the right to intervene, militarily and otherwise, in the region.

"We reject that completely. We do not live in anybody's backyard and we are not accepting the right in America or anybody else to instruct us on our foreign relations, to tell us who our friends must be, or to tell us what we can do," he said.

"We are going to defend what we have built. We believe that the people of our country have gotten to the point where they are going to fight to protect the revolution," Prime Minister Bishop said.

