

## **17. THE COLOMBO PLAN: CEYLON, AUSTRALIA, NEW ZEALAND, VIETNAM, CAMBODIA, LAOS, PAKISTAN, BANGLADESH, INDIA, 1956-57**

In 1948 the countries of the British Commonwealth had a conference in London and decided on a plan to provide aid to the less developed of the member countries. This was as much residue of "Empire" as the times would permit. The more fortunate countries, Britain, Canada and Australia, along with a non-member, Japan, were to be donors. Though the aid was bi-lateral, a Bureau was established in Colombo for whatever coordination was needed. The Director of the Bureau was chosen from the donor countries in rotation.

First Britain nominated Geoffrey Wilson of the Treasury to head up the Bureau. Then came Australia in the person of Mr. Curtin, member of one of Australia's eminent families.

In 1956 it was the turn of Canada to name a head of the Colombo Plan Bureau, and I was named. There was a formality of election by the Council in Colombo consisting of the Ambassadors to Ceylon of the several member countries. My boss, Herbert Marshall, then Dominion Statistician, gung-ho for the Empire in its time, was not going to turn down a request by the Commonwealth, and so I was released.

The job consisted mostly in ceremonial, visits to the dozen or so countries stretching from Pakistan to Laos. This "showing the flag" of the Commonwealth had a purely diplomatic function.

As on an earlier occasion our children, Barbara, now aged 10 and Robert aged 8 didn't like leaving Ottawa, and again we made the mistake of not adequately explaining what we were doing and why. Here I was starting out on a diplomatic assignment, and forgetting all about diplomacy in my own home.

Within a few weeks of the scheduled departure I was putting some books in the back of our car when I turned sharply, twisted my back, and suffered great pain. We called in a doctor and he prescribed bed rest. We called another doctor, a surgeon by the name of Dr. Killam (I am not joking) and he ordered up an ambulance to take me to the hospital. Once there he examined me at length, and said the only thing to do was operate. We had two friends who underwent that operation, and on one it worked, on the other it left the person crippled. I said nothing doing, and he was disgusted, and immediately had an ambulance take me home. So here we were, between two doctors, one of whom recommended doing nothing, and the other doing too much. What was the next step?

In bed with the pain, I was visited by a number of people, all of whom were sympathetic. But one of them, Elsie Ralston, was more than sympathetic: she urged me to call an osteopath, Dr.

Parsons, (I am sad every time I recall that sometime later, Elsie was smoking in bed, started a fire in which she was fatally burned.)

I barely knew of the existence of osteopaths but was desperate enough to try anything, and Dr. Parsons came to the house with his portable table. Believe it or not, that was the only house call required. He manipulated my back, loosening up the parts of the backbone that were held rigid , and within a day or two I was able to get up and walk around slowly. After half a dozen visits to his office I was ready for travel.

To avoid strain on the trip I took BOAC's flight to Britain that had a few cabins with bunks. My family sat up.

When we arrived in Colombo we were met at the plane by Canadian Ambassador James Hurley, whose first words were "Call me Jim". Based on that our children always referred to him as "call-me-Jim".

He took us to Bank House, located on a main road running down to the harbor, and a block or so above the Galle Face Green, a grassy park bordering the ocean. At Bank House we met John, the prince of servants. He spoke good English, and was in charge of a cook named Paul, and a houseboy. John and Beatrice got along famously, and he was happy to discuss my predecessors and their wives, sometimes delivering himself of spicy tales of philandering while husbands were away working.

When I got to the office I found Sharif from Karachi, Goonitilike, a Singalese, and Dorothy Abeywardene, secretary and financial officer, also Singalese.

My job was essentially to travel the circuit of the member countries, which were mostly the ex-colonies of South and Southeast Asia. My visits to Delhi, Singapore, Saigon, Pnom Penh and Vientiane, lasted a few days or a week each, and I did my best to make the receiving countries happy with the Plan, and with the aid they were receiving from one of the more advanced members.

Of the travels I have spotty but colorful memories of the graceful dancing girls on show in Pnom Penh; (less pleasant) Indonesia in the waning days of Sukarno; Saigon, looking for all the world like a French provincial town, with queenly women in traditional costume going about their business in it. ..

That was before the French attacked to reduce a political regime they didn't like, and were fought to a standstill by the Vietnamese. Not heeding the French example, the Americans took its turn to attack. They were spurred on by imagining they were fighting the danger of Communism and

Chinese domination. In fact the Vietnamese had no love for the Chinese and would have fought a Chinese invasion. We had a series of images to support our invasion--there was a "domino effect" by which the fall of Vietnam would lead to the fall of other countries to Communism and to the Chinese; as things got discouraging our politicians kept seeing "light at the end of the tunnel". After protracted and destructive fighting, with the usual heavy bombing, the Americans saw they could not win; the war was terribly unpopular back home, especially with the younger generation. Fifty thousand Americans were dead and perhaps a million Vietnamese. The war came to an indecisive end. But at the time I visited, all this was in the future, and I could see Vietnam and indeed the whole territory peaceful and moderately well-governed.

The most primitive of the three parts of French Indo-China was Laos. When I got to Vientiane I was duly met by government officials, with whom I talked repeatedly during my stay. (When I visited most places I was given a car and driver; in Vientiane I had to do my own driving--they had no one who could speak English or French and was able to drive.)

There was a good deal of American aid going into Laos considering the size of the country, and the Laotians made no secret of where the aid was going, i.e. into their individual pockets. At the end of my stay I reported to the official in charge of the US aid mission about what I called waste of money. "Not at all," was the reply, "we have to keep the natives loyal to us". In fact he was not keeping the 'natives' loyal but only a few people in the very top ranks. One could surmise how much loyalty that money was buying. Such mal-administration weakened the American support for foreign aid.

When I got back to Colombo and looked into the operation of the office, I found that my assistant Sharif really had no function. Or if he had one it consisted in opposing all changes I suggested. I am afraid that my instinct for economizing got the better of me, and I asked Sharif to resign. He refused.

I asked advice from the Ambassadors to Ceylon of donor countries who formed the Advisory Council to the Colombo Plan office, and was told that I had better get professional advice from London. On contact with the UK Treasury, I was offered a representative who would come out, examine the organization of the office, and advise whether the saving was worth the ill-will we would incur by firing a Pakistani. Gordon Crichton was the person; he came and spent a week with us, talking to me and to Sharif, and in the end reported that we should go ahead with the dismissal. Crichton was a solid bureaucrat, not conspicuously imaginative, but that quality was not needed for this task.

There is a sequel to this. Sharif bore no grudge and when later I was in Karachi threw a party for me. He was an excellent host and the food was good. The only thing bad about that party was taking a spoonful of rice and curry and then feeling something moving in my mouth when I took

a spoonful. Removing it I found a cockroach, badly damaged but still alive and moving its legs. I spat it out and without saying anything left the plate in a corner where the servants would pick it up. No harm was done, but I kept asking myself whether that insect was there in the natural course of events or whether it was put there.

Altogether there were some 25 or 30 consultants, experts in various fields, and once a week I invited them to a meeting in Bank House. Outstanding among them was Bill Lantz, head of the Canadian fisheries project. Someone had had a great idea--providing a ship and instruction how to operate it and fish effectively. The Ceylonese were given thorough training. The only trouble was that those tropical waters do not harbor many fish.

But what was useful was having the foreign experts meeting one another and talking about their problems. That was a great help to morale.

The term of my assignment was 36 months, and after 20 I began to feel that there wasn't much more I could do, and we packed up and left. I was criticized for this, but it couldn't have been a terrible offense--that year I was awarded the medal of the Professional Institute of the Civil Service of Canada for my work in Ceylon. It was handed to me by Governor-General Vincent Massey at a dinner meeting of the Institute in the Chateau Laurier.

It remains to mention that an ultimately tragic turning point in the history of Ceylon occurred during our time there. The population of the country was and is mostly Singalese, but it includes a sizable minority of Tamils. The latter had been brought in some generations back to pick the tea crop. Owners of the plantations, ever alive to costs, found it was cheaper to import Tamils, paying their passage from Tamilnad in south India, than have the crop picked by the fun-loving Singalese. Up to the time we arrived the two ethnic groups had been getting along reasonably well, even though the Singalese were Buddhists looking in cultural matters to Burma, while the Tamils were Hindus looking to Tamilnad.

However one man changed this harmony, and started the disorder that continues to this day. It was Prime Minister Bandaranaike, an especially pious Buddhist, who never opened his mouth without making a plea for peace. I remember the time he came to Bank House on Colombo Plan business, dressed in his white sheet. (Upper-class Singalese dressed western style, with jacket and tie, but left-leaning politicians found it politic to identify sartorially with the masses. And Bandaranaike was far left. I promised I would transmit his message to London with my favorable recommendation, and he left. I gave him no sign of how I felt about his anti-Tamil policies. It could have gotten me and Canada into trouble if I had asked him just what the Tamils were doing that was so harmful.

I never learned Singalese, but Beatrice did, at least to the point of reading the daily press. I still remember her sitting in a comfortable alcove and drinking tea while reading the morning paper. The paper was full of speeches by Bandaranaike expressing outrage at the government jobs held by Tamils that should have gone to Singalese. A government job was the most prized career, and Singalese thought that all these belonged to them.

The Singalese are light-hearted folk. The elite among them who have been educated at Oxford bring back a schoolboy language and mode of behavior that sound odd in this distant ex-colony.

One episode shows the idea. When confrontation got bitter a number of Tamil leaders, officials and businessmen of dignity and distinction, held a Satyagraha on the Galle Face Green, which slopes down to the ocean. This consisted in their sitting on the grass and saying silent prayers, a non-violent unspoken rebuke to the majority. While it was going on young members of the Singalese elite descended on the Green, carrying the unresisting Tamils to the water and throwing them in.

Bandaranaike spoke of peace at the same time as he unleashed a savage civil war. Early in the 19th century a missionary, Bishop Heber, wrote of Ceylon that "every prospect pleases. And only man is vile."

Most of the people we met were Singalese, but our next door neighbor was Arumugam, a Tamil, a hydraulic engineer, evidently very capable. On such a dry island settlements were mostly located under dams, and traditional wars took the form of breaking open the opponent's dam and starving him into subjection. So hydraulic engineers were very important. Karl Wittfogel wrote extensively about Oriental Despotism, claiming that the urgent need to protect their dam made people accept absolute rule.

Our neighbor had a charming family, including a girl of about 10 who performed the graceful South Indian dances. The older of the girls played the Veena, an Indian instrument resembling a cello, while the other girl played by striking with a stick on a set of porcelain bowls filled with water to different levels. It was a pleasure to associate with a family not superficially imitating the culture learned in their stay at Oxford, but expressing a deeply felt indigenous tradition.

I am sorry that I never had a chance to see them again or even to correspond with them. I can say no more about Ceylon, since after leaving in 1957 we have never visited or been in touch, but the newspapers report that the northern part of the island is all but governed by the Tamil Tigers and Singalese don't go there. Partition that small island? Shri Lanka will insist on maintaining the integrity of the national territory that it has done so much to divide.

Two years after getting back from Ceylon my time at the Bureau came to an end.