

The secret story of Grenada's independence

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Abstract: Using declassified British government files at the National Archives, the author shows how the US invasion of Grenada in 1983, which overthrew the radical government of Maurice Bishop and the New Jewel Movement, was not the first time that such an invasion was contemplated in Grenada's recent history. The UK had had an almost identical plan to land a battalion of troops on Grenada a decade earlier, on the very eve of independence, to ensure the continuation in power of the dictatorial Eric Gairy, should the widespread unrest across the island lead to his ousting.

Keywords: Caribbean independence, decolonisation, Eric Gairy, Grenada, Maurice Bishop, New Jewel Movement

The smaller islands of the eastern Caribbean were among some of the last British colonies to gain independence. The Caribbean had to wait until long after Macmillan's 1960 Wind of Change speech, which signalled an end to Britain's African Empire, and Wilson's commitment to withdrawing many (but not all) of the British military bases east of Suez by 1971. Grenada's independence in 1974

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was carefully engineered by the Heath government to ensure that the pliant strongman, Eric Gairy, had a 'free hand' to deal with the New Jewel Movement (NJM). The NJM was a revolutionary Black Power movement that threatened to nationalise British economic interests in the Caribbean, which were seen as comparable with the UK's investments in India. MI5, now Britain's domestic security service, still at that time had spies stationed in the Caribbean, who feared the NJM would assassinate Gairy on Independence Day.

The tiny island of Grenada gained international attention in 1979 when Left-wing rebels overthrew the dictator Eric Gairy. The Grenadian revolution would last until 1983, when US Marines infamously invaded the island. But declassified British government files, available at the National Archives in London, reveal how the UK had an almost identical plan to land a battalion of troops on Grenada a decade earlier. The Ministry of Defence had gone as far as preparing a secret invasion plan to restore colonial rule if Gairy lost control.

A fortnight before Grenada's independence in February 1974, the UK's Chief of the Defence Staff wrote to the Defence Secretary with a secret plan for evacuating 200 British subjects from the island using warships, helicopters and Royal Marine Commandos.¹ Anti-government protests and strikes had gripped Grenada in the months leading up to independence, demanding the resignation of the island's ruthless leader Eric Gairy. The NJM had produced a manifesto which read:

On February 7th, 1974, we are supposed to become independent. If we do, this will be independence in name only. Gairy believes that independence means pulling down one flag and putting up another, composing a new anthem, creating a new motto, calling the Governor 'Governor General' and the Premier, 'Prime Minister'; playing steelband, jumping up and feteing; cleaning up and beautifying the streets. But after all the celebrations and bacchanal are over and we wake up next day (or next week) with a hangover, the price of food, clothes and everything else will still keep going up, wages will still be the same (or less), the condition of the schools, hospitals and roads (except for maybe two more roundabouts) will continue to get worse, and the people's housing will still be the same or worse.²

The NJM manifesto went on to demand \$100 million reparations from Britain 'to make up for some of the money stolen from us and the exploitation, human misery, suffering and degradation we have endured at their hands over the last 400 years'. Other NJM policies - 'Jewel' stood for Joint endeavour for welfare, education and liberation - included primary healthcare, secondary education, low-cost housing, land redistribution, people's assemblies and a non-aligned foreign policy.³

In this context, Whitehall did not rule out British forces intervening to 'restore law and order after a breakdown of the Gairy Government', deeming that 'this is a decision which can be taken only in the light of the circumstances at the time'.⁴ In the end, the invasion plan was not used, as Gairy clung to power. Other files,

marked 'secret', show that British spies in the security service MI5 were monitoring trade unions in Grenada and running informants inside the revolutionary NJM.

Spies

Just days before independence, British intelligence reports described the NJM as:

an extremist organisation whose main aim is the overthrow of Gairy and his government (by force if other means fail) and the setting up in its place of a people's revolutionary regime. The NJM is in touch with other similar organisations in the Caribbean, particularly Trinidad.⁵

The spooks speculated that the NJM could try to assassinate Gairy on Independence Day, 'when his public presence amongst crowds, noise and fireworks might present a favourable opportunity'.⁶ The MI5 men noted that 'On the other hand, the West Indian temperament does not seem to lend itself to determined and fanatical action except sporadically.'⁷ The intelligence officers acknowledged that Gairy's security forces included 'ruthless' police aides, 'an un-uniformed and undisciplined body ... many of them have criminal records', who were under the Premier's personal control.⁸ Known as the 'Mongoose Gang' among islanders, this police militia had killed Rupert Bishop, father of the NJM leader, shortly before in January 1974.

The files reveal that MI5 had been watching Grenada's labour movement in the months building up to independence. A planned strike in December 1973 generated a flurry of intelligence reports based on secret sources in the trade unions and other leftwing groups. One memo claims:

Source stated that there would undoubtedly be a general strike on 27 December ... Source also stated that NJM considered they were not yet ready for final confrontation and had no intention [of] using violence at present ... Source is in a good position to know and has good entree into NJM.⁹

Another intelligence report from December 1973 also examined the likelihood of NJM violence and police capabilities, noting that:

In the past the NJM has tended to exercise restraint in resorting to violence, although we believe that they have the capacity to stir up disorders to the point where the weak and inefficient police force would lose control. Much will depend on whether the NJM judge that their interest will be served by violence. A frigate of the West Indies Squadron will be in Barbados, about 23 hours steaming away, from mid December and early January.¹⁰

The MI5 intelligence reports on the trade unions and leftwing groups continued into late February 1974, after independence. More significantly, the secret intelligence reports on Grenada were compiled by the MI5 station in Trinidad, which had orchestrated the overthrow of Guyana's democratically elected

government in 1953, where Winston Churchill feared that the country's leader, Cheddi Jagan, was too leftwing.¹¹

Marines

In the case of Grenada, the British planners were concerned about the overthrow of Gairy by radical leftwing rebels in the NJM after independence. On 25 January 1974, Foreign Minister Lord Balniel warned his colleagues that:

The internal situation in Grenada has deteriorated seriously in the last few weeks. There have been strikes, interruptions of public services, and demonstrations which have led to violence including shooting, with resultant casualties including three deaths. Nevertheless Mr Gairy's Government is still in control. There is a fair chance that, with the security forces at his disposal (the police and the newly recalled 'police aides') he will succeed in containing the situation at least until independence on 7 February 1974.¹²

However, drastic measures were being contemplated: 'In the worst case it is possible that the government may not succeed in retaining control so that it becomes impracticable to transfer sovereignty on 7 February to a cohesive and effective authority.' This would put the UK in a difficult position, the minister explained:

The choice will then have to be made, in the light of the circumstance at the time, between:

- a) refraining from any intervention, except possibly an operation to rescue 'UK Belongers', and accepting the consequential public criticism of abandonment of responsibility in chaotic circumstances;
- b) intervening in a state which is legally independent (or on the point of becoming so) to restore law and order and constitutional government. This would involve a reversion to colonial rule, and place us in a position from which it would be difficult to extricate ourselves. And we could expect strong criticism internationally from certain quarters at least.¹³

Britain's Defence Secretary then convened a Defence and Oversea Policy Committee meeting on 30 January 1974 with the military top brass to discuss a secret briefing paper titled 'Grenada: Policy on Intervention by HM Forces'. The document covered a range of scenarios, which included an invasion plan. On the possibility of 'Intervention to restore law and order after a breakdown of the Gairy Government', the briefing noted that:

the Ministry of Defence has examined in general terms how such an operation might be mounted and what forces would have to be used ... The broad proposal is that a Royal Marine Commando or the Spearhead Battalion should be flown from the UK by RAF VC.10 to Trinidad or Barbados, via Bermuda ... At

the destination island they would embark in HMS Bulwark, which is within two days' steaming of the area, and be taken by her to Grenada. Bulwark carries a squadron of Wessex helicopters and sufficient logistic support for 28 days' operation.¹⁴

The invasion plan bears striking resemblance to the 1983 US Operation Urgent Fury, which also relied on troop carriers, helicopters and marines. The UK military chiefs were also asked to consider, 'What would be the legal position of British forces sent into the Island? If a Marine, in the course of his duty, should kill a local inhabitant, would he be liable for trial by court-martial for the civil offence of, for example, manslaughter?'¹⁵ MOD lawyers decided that the relevant authority would be the UK Forces (Jurisdiction of Colonial Courts) Order 1965.

The papers also show how the British planners were concerned about sending paratroopers to Grenada in 1974, because, although the regiment was on stand-by, it was tarred by its involvement in the Bloody Sunday massacre of protesters in Northern Ireland/Six Counties two years previously. The secret briefing noted that:

The Royal Marine Commando is currently on seven days' notice, and if very urgent intervention became necessary, the alternative might have to be adopted, of sending the Spearhead Battalion. We might wish to avoid this, since the battalion is at present the 2nd Battalion the Parachute Regiment, whose associations with Londonderry we might wish to avoid in the Grenada situation.¹⁶

In November 1973, Gairy's police militia had badly beaten demonstrators in an episode known as Grenada's Bloody Sunday.

Black Power

But Britain had already calculated that it was preferable to grant independence quickly to the island while Gairy was still in charge and let him carry out a crack-down on radical elements without Britain being seen to be involved, before they grew to dominate the opposition. The Foreign Secretary had sent a secret memo to the Prime Minister in May 1973, following a Defence Overseas Planning meeting on Grenada. According to this:

The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary takes the view, which is surely right, that our own interest is that Grenada should proceed to independence. He adds that there are signs that the role of the official Opposition in Grenada may before long be taken over by a newly formed Black Power organisation; and he suggests that it might be better that *Mr. Gairy should have a free hand to keep such developments under control in an independent Grenada* than that we ourselves should run the risk of becoming involved in the task. He therefore seeks agreement that he should at once inform the Grenada Government and Opposition that we are willing to terminate association by means of an Order

in Council; to grant independence; and to amend the existing constitution as necessary.¹⁷ (Emphasis added)

The paper also cited a lack of intelligence on the realities on the ground, which could explain the involvement of MI5 officers in Trinidad to monitor the situation in Grenada.

The fact is that we know very little about the local situation. There are certainly Black Power elements at work; and there are some of them in the Joint Endeavour for Welfare, Education and Liberation (JEWEL) which has sprung very rapidly into prominence. It is probably true to say that we simply do not know to what extent Black Power is influential in the movement.¹⁸

The growth of 'Black Power' across the Caribbean appears as a consistent concern in Whitehall files from this era. A secret memo titled 'The Caribbean: attitude of the United States', from January 1972, stated:

The Americans are understandably anxious that a collection of mini-states, perhaps orientated towards Black Power or Communism, should not come into existence in the Caribbean as a result of British withdrawal, with consequent political instability in the area which could be exploited by Cuba and other opponents of the United States ... We can therefore go some way towards allaying the Americans' fear of a possibly [sic] proliferation of 'Black Republics' in the Caribbean proper, but probably not in Grenada or the Bahamas.¹⁹

The files also reveal that Britain's interest in the Caribbean was comparable to investments in India and oil reserves in the Middle East. A document prepared for the Prime Minister in November 1970, called 'Policy in the Commonwealth Caribbean', noted that:

we have a capital investment in the Caribbean, which may be at risk from nationalisation, of at least £250 million. This figure is comparable with our present estimate of British capital investment in India (about £300 million) and would probably be larger if it were possible to include figures for banking, insurance and the oil industry, all of which are, of course, particularly vulnerable to the risk of internal disaffection. And Trinidad is a source of oil which might be very important to us if Middle Eastern supplies were interrupted ... Our economic interests in the area (if we want to keep them) require stability. So do our (and the Americans') very considerable political and strategic interests.²⁰

But Britain's reliance on Gairy to safeguard such interests would subsequently become a private joke within the Foreign Office. By 1977, the British High Commissioner to Grenada, Christopher Diggins, who had been involved in the

island's independence three years earlier, had become so exasperated by Gairy's increasingly dictatorial behaviour that he wrote a 'school report' on him, from the paternalistic position of a headmaster.²¹ The diplomat told the FCO in London that

I have just sent off my Annual Review for Grenada. But as Grenada means Gairy, it seems to me that it would be much better and more succinctly covered by something on the lines of a school report on him.

The enclosed report for 'Gairyland Academy', which a colleague in the FCO thought 'rather good', contained the High Commissioner's appraisal of Gairy's ability across a range of school subjects. For scripture, the report said of Gairy, who was now fond of comparing himself to God, that 'Having the advantage of direct communications with the Deity, his performance in the subject is outstanding, if unconventional.' His health was reported to be 'Physically robust - unfortunately.'

The report alluded to the political intimidation by his Mongoose Gang in the run up to the 1976 elections:

I have also repeatedly had to warn him about using his pet mongoose to frighten the other boys, several of whom it has bitten quite painfully. This has had a deleterious effect on their exam results. It has made him so unpopular that it has been necessary to install special guards in the bushes surrounding the House, at considerable expense, to protect him against possible attempts at retribution.

The Headmaster's final comment was that Gairy was a 'Trying' pupil.

But if London was losing patience, the people of Grenada had none left at all. Britain's decision to prevent Grenada's revolution in 1974 just made it inevitable by 1979.

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