
A Common Answer to Disparate Questions

Envisioning Caribbean Federation
in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century

The twentieth century began with much uncertainty in the British Caribbean. To some within the empire, much of the region had become a “synonym of ruin.”¹ In the words of Joseph Chamberlain, the area was the “Empire’s darkest slum.”² Economically, many of the colonies remained mired in depression, several because of the continuous boom-and-bust cycle of the still-dominant sugar industry. Politically, the installation of the Crown Colony system in all but a few colonies, a move that was supposed to bring good government, social order, and prosperity, more often only added another layer of bureaucracy and economic inefficiency. The region also remained deeply divided along racial and class lines, with the bulk of the Afro-Caribbean population suffering at the bottom of the economic ladder with little say in the functioning of the colonial governments.

Despite differences of opinions on the specific “ills” affecting the British Caribbean, a common remedy emerged within many conceptualizations of the West Indian future in the twentieth century—federation. As Hume Wrong notes in his *Government of the West Indies* (1923),

When one contemplates the wide circle of British possessions around the Caribbean Sea . . . one is left with the impression that here is to be found a waste of effort, an untidiness that calls for rearrangement, diffusion and variety where concentration and symmetry should prevail. In other parts of the British Commonwealth the tendency has been for distinct units which are geographically related gradually to coalesce for some or for all political purposes. Why should the West Indies remain almost as scattered and distinct politically as they were a hundred years ago?³

Ideas of a regional union between different countries and colonies of the Caribbean were not confined to the British West Indies. In the nineteenth century, one can find proposals for an Antillean Confederation between Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic, as well as plans involving Haiti and other islands of the region. Nevertheless, it was within the British Caribbean that the idea persisted and endured the longest.⁴

Although proposals for federation and other variations of regional unification in the British West Indies existed before, the idea reemerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries among an array of politicians, activists, and organizations within and beyond the British Caribbean. Given the disparate and often opposing groups that proposed and supported federation, there were inherently different motivations and expectations of what a federation would, could, and should do. Indeed, one finds a wide range of ideas related to political and economic reform in the region within the various proposals for federation between some or all of the British West Indian colonies. All told, the idea of federation purported to be the answer to contrasting and competing goals, existing simultaneously as a tool of colonial control and also a means to achieve varying degrees of liberation and empowerment within or outside the British Empire.

This chapter explores support and conceptualizations of a united British West Indies (alternatively proposed as a federation, confederation, or closer union) from the late nineteenth century through the 1920s among the “colonial power brokers” of the region, West Indian activists within the Caribbean, and various other activists beyond the Caribbean. It provides an overview of proposals for federation from the Crown and white oligarchies of the West Indies in order to establish what many prior studies have assumed to be *the* history of the subject in this era. However, the greater part of the chapter examines the co-opting of the idea of federation by West Indian activists in the Caribbean (especially Afro-Caribbeans within the emerging West Indian nationalist movements) and a range of black activists in the broader black diaspora. It is interested particularly in the ways in which concepts of “race” shaped perceptions and pursuit of Caribbean federation during these years.

The colonial power brokers of the region—a group that included colonial officials in the colonies and metropole as well as the white elites of the colonies whom the Crown viewed as the only responsible portion of the colonial population—put forth multiple proposals in the early twentieth century. Despite historical tensions among this group, and differences within their proposals, overall they sought primarily to create a “united

status quo” aimed at administrative efficiency and greater economic productivity and opportunity. Support for federation, however, was not limited to these proposals.

Various local and regional reform associations, most middle-class led and many of which came to be predominantly composed of the vast Afro-Caribbean majority in most of the West Indian colonies, also embraced the idea of federation in the early twentieth century. These included colony-specific organizations focused on local struggles, as well as the burgeoning regional West Indian nationalist and labor movements. In both local and regional organizations, one could find those who supported federation as *an* important step in the pursuit of self-government, which often included demands for an expanded franchise, increased representation, responsible government, and eventually dominion status *within* the British Empire for the individual West Indian colonies. At the same time, one could also find in both local and regional organizations those who had many of the same aims, but who viewed the creation of a united West Indian nation (via federation)—in or out of the empire—as *the* ultimate goal in their pursuit of self-government and self-determination. For the latter group, the advancement of the region as a whole outweighed the insular concerns of individual colonies. These distinctions, however, often proved fluid, given the overlapping membership and sentiments between many local and regional organizations.

In either case, whether viewed primarily as a means to achieve local or regional reforms, the pursuit of a Caribbean federation by West Indians within these movements often included additional motivations. Given the centrality of racial justifications of British colonialism, the programs of many such groups incorporated overt calls for racial equality not only in the West Indies but worldwide. Many Afro-Caribbean reformers and their organizations within the British West Indies ardently pursued racial uplift, unity, and empowerment and embedded these ideas within their demands for self-determination. These pursuits aligned with and bolstered their support of a Caribbean federation, which in turn became more than a regional, West Indian project. It also became a racialized project with diasporic implications.

Beyond the Caribbean, in diaspora centers such as Harlem and London, where Afro-Caribbean migrants more concretely identified as West Indians than they did *within* the colonies in the early twentieth century, West Indians and West Indian issues, including social and political reform and empowerment, were overtly racialized. With much the same racially

conscious support displayed by some West Indians within the region, and often with direct communication and connections to them, many Afro-Caribbean, African American, and other black activists in these diaspora centers viewed federation as a means to unite and empower the region for the good of West Indians, particularly the black majority who many assumed were *the* West Indians. They too presumed the creation of a Caribbean federation would be beneficial to far more than just West Indians.

Colonial Power Brokers and Proposals for Caribbean Federation

Twentieth-century visions of a united British Caribbean were rooted in a series of proposals, investigations, and experiments for regional cooperation that circulated the region between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. These efforts most often originated in the metropole and represented imperial efforts to institute efficient government via the streamlining of colonial administration in the region. Such proposals often irritated the local planter-merchant oligarchies, who wished to maintain control of their particular colonies and economic interests through their powerful representative assemblies. Moreover, many of the West Indian colonies competed against each other economically, which created island-based rivalries that tended to undermine regional reform projects. For many within the dominant white oligarchies of the Caribbean, especially those in more prosperous colonies, the prospect of formal association with rival or poorer West Indian colonies was unappealing. Nevertheless, in rare cases, these groups did accept projects for regional cooperation if they deemed it to be in their best interests.

In many ways, projects for Caribbean federation represented a return to the mechanisms of governance that previously prevailed in the region. The original “Caribbee” colonies were governed together under a proprietorship granted to the Earl of Carlisle between the 1620s and 1670s.⁵ In the following decades, however, governance was repeatedly disaggregated and reagggregated as the colonies became more prosperous and demanded more control over their own affairs. Perhaps the earliest attempt at uniting different colonies took place in the late seventeenth century with the creation of the Leeward Island Association.⁶ Various other Leeward and Windward Island groupings were attempted on and off in the eighteenth century; however, rivalries between the colonies and the desire for local representation within the Old Representative System generally limited or

prevented the successful establishment of long-term and stable intra-regional associations.⁷

New attempts to unite the British Caribbean colonies appeared in the nineteenth century. Although planters and merchants often thought of themselves as sharing a common (white) West Indian identification and cooperated in associations and occasional meetings designed to protect and promote their interests, such as the Society of West India Planters and Merchants, the West India Committee, and Colonial Congress of 1831, this tendency did not make them more welcoming to proposals for regional unification in the Caribbean itself.⁸ Other than the reorganization in 1831 of Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo into the single colony of British Guiana, the local white oligarchies generally remained opposed to political unions of the West Indian colonies.⁹

During the reorganization of colonial rule in the post-emancipation era, the Colonial Office proposed and instituted various new colonial unions in the British Caribbean. The success of the Canadian confederation of 1867 rejuvenated the Colonial Office's hopes of successful amalgamations in the West Indies, which they increasingly proposed in the 1870s and beyond.¹⁰ There was even some debate of a more far-reaching imperial federation of the British Empire.¹¹ With such ideas gaining popularity in circles of colonial governance, an 1871 parliamentary act created the Leeward Islands Colony. This federation, however, remained rather weak, with most legislative and financial power reserved for the individual island legislatures.¹²

In the mid-1870s the Colonial Office proposed a merger between Barbados and the Windward Islands of Grenada, St. Vincent, St. Lucia, and Tobago. There was some support among the working classes of these colonies for such a grouping, but the middle and upper classes of Barbados strongly resisted the suggestion, which they saw as a threat to their economic well-being and a potential hindrance to the continued development of the colony. An island-wide riot occurred in 1876, driven in part by resistance to the planned merger. As a result, the reigning governor of Barbados was transferred to Hong Kong and the federal initiative dropped.¹³

Despite these events, Barbados and the Windward Islands retained a joint governorship until 1885, when Barbados was disassociated completely from all other colonies. Grenada, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and Tobago were grouped into a Windward Island association in 1885 with a common governor, though they maintained their individual legislatures. Tobago was removed from this association in 1889 and joined with Trinidad to form a single colony.¹⁴

Crown efforts at colonial reorganization continued in the 1890s. In 1893–94 a royal commission, organized to investigate conditions in Dominica, issued a report that argued that there would be important benefits gained from a federation of the entire British West Indies under the administration of one governor-general. However, the report also noted that the time for such a move was not yet ripe, and the Crown initiated no formal plans.¹⁵ A few years later, an 1897 royal commission rejected suggestions for a federation under a single governor-general and a combined West Indies civil service.¹⁶ In 1898 the British House of Commons issued another call for a “single government for all the islands,” but that too proved unsuccessful.¹⁷ As the century closed, what remained of projects for federation was only a series of loose associations between some, but not all, of the British Caribbean colonies.

With few exceptions, such proposals for varying levels of cooperation and association between the colonies were limited to visions of administrative efficiency and increased commercial prowess. They originated primarily in the metropole, which sought, generally unsuccessfully, to impose them on the colonies. Some within the planter-merchant oligarchies had, at times, relaxed their opposition to such schemes when they believed regional cooperation, in one form or another, could aid them financially during times of economic depression. Generally, then, debates about closer union, confederation, or federation were almost exclusively about how these plans would affect colonial administration or the local white oligarchies.

A notable exception was Charles Spencer Salmon’s 1888 proposal for a Caribbean Confederation in the British West Indies. Salmon called for full and equal integration of the Afro-Caribbean populations and a federation of *all* British West Indian colonies.¹⁸ He ridiculed the duplicative and inefficient nature of the current West Indian colonial governments.

For the fifteen colonies there are now eight governors, all receiving their orders from Downing Street direct, each with his staff, and nine lieutenant-governors, administrators, or presidents, four of whom receive orders from the Governor of the Windward Islands, and five from the Governor of the Leeward Islands. This makes seventeen governors and administrators for the fifteen colonies, because the Windward and Leeward Islands have every one not only their separate administrators, but a governor for each of the two groups.¹⁹

Salmon lambasted such colonial bureaucracy for needlessly wasting resources, “as if each of these colonies were large, distant, rich, and powerful