

ACP SUGAR - THE LONDON END

H.E. A.W. Symmonds, GCM,
High Commissioner for Barbados

When Bernard Boullé gave his illuminating address, he said he felt like a football commentator asked to speak about a game which had not yet taken place. I am in rather a different position because on this last day of the seminar so much has been said. I am asked to comment on a game of which the audience knows the result.

On behalf of my fellow High Commissioners may I first express appreciation of the efforts of the trade unionists which have helped to bring about this seminar. All of us who have been involved are delighted to see it take place.

Secondly, I hope I may be forgiven for admitting that before our High Commissioners' group was established towards the end of 1980, my knowledge of sugar and that of some of my colleagues was limited. We knew we should advise our wives to buy cane not beet sugar and my friend Antony Murray indicated where we could purchase it. The High Commissioner for Guyana, Dr. Cedric Grant, became our first Chairman and quickly mastered the issues. With some trepidation I accepted my colleagues' invitation to take over from him.

In London we did not begin with the drama of the Brussels group. We started with the background of a little too much sugar and not enough refining capacity. At the time, the threatened closure of a British refinery affected not only the trade unions who approached us, but our Governments who were worried about physical access for our sugar to EEC markets. It was our Ministers meeting in ACP Council who decided that the London end was important. Before I came here I was Permanent Secretary in the Barbados Ministry of Foreign Affairs and I participated in the decisions to set up our mission in Brussels. We had the Sugar Protocol of the Lomé Convention and it seemed to me that our early difficulties had been resolved. So the problems could be left to Brussels. How wrong I was.

When we started I met those outstanding experts to whose work I would like to pay tribute. We High Commissioners have been the spokesmen but we have depended on them as advisers, working not only for us, but also for our colleagues in Brussels. Most of them have been engaged on sugar problems for many years, some from the days of the Commonwealth Sugar Agreement.

Action is at the London end. As President Harry Truman used to say 'The buck stops here'. The sugar comes to Britain, we depend on access to UK, and the price is paid here. So our role is very important and my colleagues and I accept this.

Our principal task is to sensitize the British Government and public on ACP sugar issues, and to keep in touch with them, with Tate & Lyle and with the trade unions. Our interests are closely intertwined and there is much common ground. We appreciate Tate & Lyle's assistance in bringing their objectives and ours to the authorities' attention. We, in turn, depend on assistance from our own Governments and from producers and trade unions in the industry who supply us with information we need to do our job. The reduction in refining capacity has been mentioned frequently during this week and I need not repeat our concern expressed so often. But we are particularly interested to ensure that the refining policies of Tate & Lyle our sole refiners, - as well as decisions relating to investment, developments in production, and marketing, both in cane and beet - are monitored and reported on. Without adequate planning at home efficient operation is impossible and without this feed-back, planning for the future is not feasible.

We recognise that Brussels has the important job in the price negotiations, but we believe important decisions are also made in London. In the 1981/82 price negotiations the issue of a differential price for beet and cane arose. Although the negotiations were in Brussels, the final decision had to be made by the British Government to bring about the price equality we were seeking. So after expressing our strong concern about refining capacity at the time of the Liverpool closure, our principal task was to ensure the British Government fully understood, not just through reports from Brussels, but directly through ACP representatives here, the importance of that decision to us, and our concern that the principle being enunciated would be to our detriment. Knowing the fair play for which the British are justly famed, we have endeavoured at all times to remind them of the 'bankable assurances' given when Geoffrey Rippon was negotiating Britain's entry into the EEC. If beet quotas were increased in such a way that ACP imports were threatened, it would be a breach of the Community's undertakings. We have consistently followed this up with the British Government to show clearly we consider these assurances should continue in perpetuity.

Let me return to the role of the experts. They are working for our sugar industries daily, but over the years they have also been advising our Governments long before the High Commissioners' group was formed. They advise our colleagues in Brussels, they prepare the ground for price

decisions, they make valuable contributions to our Governments' positions at international sugar meetings in London. They are the hub of activity here and we articulate the advice they give us collectively. We could not operate effectively without them and speaking particularly to our friends from the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries, I assure you it is extremely valuable work. We get the publicity and glamour but they perform the fundamental tasks and I would like to thank them for their long and loyal support.

There are two particular points we try consistently to put across to successive British Governments: first, that the Sugar Protocol would be a meaningless piece of paper unless there is room for ACP sugar in the British market. What we heard yesterday about the efficiency of the beet industry impressive and frightening as to some extent it was, is nevertheless consistent with that position. It was very refreshing to hear British Sugar's position clearly articulated from this rostrum, that in so far as they are concerned there is room for ACP sugar. Secondly, we have continued to argue that ACP sugar is in no way responsible for EEC surpluses, since it has been imported into Britain from long before the UK joined the Community. On the strength of the assurances then given we have gone on developing our sugar industries aiming for efficiency within the limits of our resources. Any suggested expansion of beet is of great concern to us. I believe trade unionists are wont to say - I don't think Frank Walcott would contradict me - the price of freedom is eternal vigilance. So eternal vigilance is required to ensure nothing is done here or in the Community to put at risk the livelihood of our people.

From time to time, we have met Peter Walker, Secretary of State for Agriculture, and Minister of State, Alec Buchanan-Smith. We believe they recognise the special significance for us of the UK's cane sugar imports and we feel reasonably assured that we will always get a sympathetic hearing. We believe the British Government will honour their commitments for ACP sugar, but as diplomats we recognise we have constantly to renew our approaches to the Government, to industry and to the politicians. So in the course of our regular diplomatic work we try to meet politicians of all parties, particular those who represent cane sugar constituencies or are sympathetic to cane and we talk to both sides of the industry, ensuring that views are put forward to support our case. We do this orally and in writing and no opportunity is neglected.

On one or two evenings recently I disappeared from this seminar in order to write personally to a number of Euro MPs, some of whom support cane and some beet. Our group is

trying to sensitize them to cane sugar issues in support of the work of our colleagues in Brussels. We must ensure that the case for cane is understood at every level. Access to Britain for cane sugar is not of marginal importance: it is vital.

While price is within the Brussels framework, it is of equal concern to us here. We do not believe we will succeed by concentrating all our efforts in Brussels. It is the British Government, the British cane sugar industry, the manufacturers who use cane sugar here and the British public who will guarantee the survival of our ACP market in UK.

Although our group grew out of the specific problems at the time Liverpool was closed, we have come to realise there is an important future ahead of us. When we were invited to talk to Alec Buchanan-Smith last year before the price negotiations, we realised it was important to ensure the British Government felt their views and ours were in harmony. Such partnership is essential. We have been in touch with them on many other issues, briefed by our experts, Colin Campbell, Antony Murray and others. We have thus been able to counteract the possible adverse effects for cane sugar, from elsewhere.

When our Ministers visit this country and talk to their opposite numbers here, we ensure that the sugar issue is raised, not only access, but economic matters as well. In the past two years, I have attended at least six of such ministerial meetings when such exchanges have been made and assurances sought. When the ISA question arose and the British Foreign Secretary was holding one of his regular consultations with Commonwealth High Commissioners, I received a message from our experts that they hoped I would intervene to make sure the British Government made clear to the EEC that its negotiating position must preserve the special arrangements for ACP sugar within the Protocol. The Foreign Secretary gave me a favourable response, assuring me this was the EEC negotiating position and nothing would be done to affect the Protocol. Once again it was accepted as being of indefinite duration. As members of the Commonwealth, we are ideally placed to lobby the British Government and through it, Britain's friends in the EEC. I believe we have been doing this quite successfully.

This seminar has taught me a lot about sugar. It has also provided an opportunity for me to meet so many of you and for you to appreciate the interest the High Commissioners take in sugar. When you go home, you will appreciate that sugar issues are fully and carefully represented here. The important issues are always before us whether we meet quarterly or monthly. Sugar may not have produced the same

publicity as increased student fees or the British Nationality Act, which were emotive issues, but I can assure you that our sugar work has been every bit as careful, determined and thorough as it was in those areas.

I hope I have been able to give you a rough outline of the High Commissioners' work on sugar. Before I sit down may I just say how much I personally share your regrets that for reasons of which we are all aware, we have not had the wisdom and the calming and assuring influence of Jock Campbell here with us during these past few days.