

The Labour Government and Decolonisation in British West Africa (1945-51)

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Abstract: The present research paper attempts to examine the attitude of the Labour Government 1945-51 towards the process of decolonisation in British West Africa and whether the party, with its socialist agenda, was able to initiate any new course different from that of the capitalist, imperialist Conservatives. To inquire into this, the paper sheds light on the colonial policies adopted by the Labour Party before 1945 and after to show how far the Party's actions once in office were consistent with its resolutions once in opposition. Previous historical research on British decolonisation dating back to the late 1950s presented the Party as playing a major role in unscrambling the empire and assigned it a positive role in Africa. However, the chief limitation of this historiographical genre is its lack of objectivity as it did not make use of primary sources. Relying on some archival sources and adopting an analytical approach, this study argues that the Labour government of 1945-51 did not mark a new move towards decolonisation in West Africa. Contrary to what has often been assumed, the Party's approach to colonial questions was not different from that of the Conservative Party. Labour adhered to the political, economic, social and ideological constituents that defined the culture of imperialism. Its colonial policy was neither innovative nor did it involve any revolutionary break with the past official colonial policy. A major influential factor had been British national self-interest.

Keywords: British Empire- Colonial Office - decolonisation - Labour Party- West Africa.

ملخص: تحاول هذه الورقة البحثية فحص موقف حكومة العمال 1945-1951 من عملية إنهاء الاستعمار في غرب إفريقيا البريطانية وما إذا كان الحزب، بأجندته الاشتراكية، قادراً على الشروع في أي مسار جديد يختلف عن المسار الرأسمالي الإمبريالي للمحافظين. وللتحقيق في ذلك، تسلط الورقة الضوء على السياسات الاستعمارية التي تبناها حزب العمل قبل عام 1945 وما بعده لتوضيح مدى توافق تصرفات الحزب فور توليه منصبه مع قراراته عندما كان في المعارضة. قدمت الأبحاث التاريخية السابقة حول إنهاء الاستعمار البريطاني التي يعود تاريخها إلى أواخر الخمسينيات من القرن الماضي أن الحزب يلعب دوراً رئيسياً في تفكيك الإمبراطورية ومنحته دوراً إيجابياً في إفريقيا. ومع ذلك، فإن القيد الرئيسي لهذا النوع التاريخي هو افتقاره إلى الموضوعية لأنه لم يستخدم المصادر الأولية، بالاعتماد على بعض المصادر الأرشيفية وتبني نهج تحليلي، تشير هذه الدراسة بأن حكومة حزب العمال في 1945-1951 لم تمثل تحركاً جديداً نحو إنهاء الاستعمار في غرب إفريقيا. على عكس ما كان يُفترض في كثير من الأحيان، لم يكن نهج الحزب تجاه المسائل الاستعمارية مختلفاً عن نهج حزب المحافظين حيث التزم العمل بالمكونات السياسية والاقتصادية والاجتماعية والأيدولوجية التي حددت ثقافة الإمبريالية. لم تكن السياسة الاستعمارية لحزب العمال مبتكرة ولا تنطوي على أي قطيعة ثورية مع السياسة الاستعمارية الرسمية السابقة. كان العامل المؤثر الرئيسي هو المصلحة الذاتية الوطنية لبريطانيا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإمبراطورية البريطانية- مكتب الشؤون الاستعمارية- انتهاء الاستعمار - حزب العمال- غرب إفريقيا.

1. Introduction

The end of the European empires has been described by J. Strachey as one of the most sudden and momentous transformations in world history (1964: 144), and it is an issue that has attracted the attention of historians up to present. In the established literature about British decolonisation in Africa in general and in West Africa in particular, the British Labour Party has received an important attention. The operational premise of the literature is that the advent of the Labour Party to power in 1945 was a turning point in the direction of British colonial policy. Labour has been projected as an anti-imperialist party whose aim was to achieve social justice and the well-being of the colonial peoples, while the Conservatives were cast as self-centred aristocratic imperialists. One of the authors who promoted this trend was Robert D. Pearce who pointed out that:

Creech Jones [Labour's Secretary of State for the Colonies 1946-50] forged a policy of devolving greater measures of self-government on the African colonies.... Wishing to avoid the mistakes made in India before 1945, Britain followed a policy, at least in West Africa, of 'nation building'. Colonial governments were to work with the elite of educated West Africans and not indulge in sterile repression. The achievement of independence in Ghana (formerly the Gold Coast) in 1957 and in Nigeria in 1960 owed much to the post-war Labour governments. When the Conservatives were elected in 1951 they were unable to stem the pace of rapid decolonisation. (1994: 46)

In his article "The Colonial Office and Planned Decolonisation in Africa", Pearce mentioned that the Labour Party's post-war strategy of decolonisation "*was built on the*

moral assumption that empire ought to be wound up and that the only acceptable rationale for empire was as a short-term training in self-government". (1984: 92)

Even among the colonial peoples and nationalists the Labour Party enjoyed wide popularity because it was believed to be anti-imperialist (for its anti-imperialist stances). The anti-colonial attitudes of the Labour Party were also given more credibility by Africans in general who believed in the Party's willingness to make changes in the government's colonial policy in favour of the colonies. In 1920, the London Committee of the National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA) persuaded the Parliamentary Labour Party to pass a petition to the Commons, which Labour did in 1921 (Langley, 1978: 251-2).

Optimistic about the Party's accession to power in 1924 and the prospects of British West Africa under a Labour government, the *Gold Coast Leader* based in Accra wrote in its 2 February 1924 lead: "we may fairly expect a certain degree of sympathy with British West African aspirations in their march to nationhood in the British Commonwealth of Nations" (Cited in Nwaubani, 1993: 199). In March 1944, Creech Jones, the then vice-chairman of the Elliot Commission on higher education in West Africa, received popular recognition in Lagos for his anti-imperialist stance. Moreover, the West African Students' Union (WASU) backed the Labour Party in the 1945 general election as it regarded the Party as "the most understanding and the most sympathetic towards the colonial problems" (Nwaubani, 1993: 199).

The Party's landslide victory was greeted with enthusiasm in the colonial territories specifically in West Africa, due to its widespread reputation as an anti-imperialist party. It was believed that the ascendancy of a socialist party to power in Britain would lead to radical changes in British colonial policy.

Judged by its track record and promises, did Labour deserve the West African's confidence and accolades? To answer the question thus posed, an examination of Labour's attitudes to the West African colonies before 1945 is essential in order to be able to evaluate Labour's policies and achievements during the period 1945-51.

2. Labour's Attitudes to Africans before 1945

Before Labour's coming to office in 1945, the Party was believed to be against empire and thus was popular and favourable to the colonial nationalists. Its anti-colonial credentials were directly linked to its origins and historical background. Historically, formed in 1900 and renamed in 1906 the Party owed much to the British labour movement tradition. It was not until 1918, after the end of the First World War, that the Party adopted a socialist programme and in 1945 it declared itself a "*socialist party and proud of it*". (The Labour Party, 1945: 6)

Almost by definition, alone, a socialist is an internationalist and humanitarian and against any kind of discrimination on the grounds of race or creed. Inevitably, therefore, Labour was supposed to reject the principle of the supremacy of the white race over the other coloured races that were regarded "inferior".

The British labouring classes, out of which the Labour Party evolved, stood against slavery, supported Wilberforce's campaign to end slavery in the British empire and backed the Northern cause when the Civil War (1861-65) broke out in the United States. In the same respect, British socialists in the twentieth century were sympathetic to the interests

of the colonial peoples and felt a strong sense of responsibility for the development and the welfare of those peoples, coupled with a sense of guilt for the past wrongs committed by Great Britain. Peter S. Speers pointed out that “*this socialist sentiment is perhaps the strongest motivation underlying the Labour government’s colonial policies*” (1948: 310). Haqqi stated, however, that Labour in the first half of the twentieth century was:

A socialist party which does not uphold the materialist conception of history, the doctrine of class war and the Marxian dogma of the dictatorship of the proletariat as the means of establishing a classless society, wherein there would be no exploitation and no oppression, and where liberty and equality would prevail. (1960: 2)

Labour’s objective was not to overthrow the existing order through class revolution and bring about a better new one. Instead, it sought to represent the British workers and defend their interests in Parliament. In 1918, the Party decided to act on a national level and for the whole community by adopting a socialist programme, *New Social Order*, appealing to all the society to join in and aiming at achieving socialism by constitutional means. It was this socialist, and not Marxian, thought which underlined Labour’s approach to domestic issues that characterised the Party’s attitudes to the empire.

A range of attitudes towards British empire could be discerned in pre-WWII Labour. The first view considered, not explicitly though, the liquidation of the empire as the only solution for Britain’s domestic problems. This group was influenced by Hobson’s ideas on imperialist economy stated in his famous polemic *Imperialism: a Study*, published in 1902 and thus coinciding with the Party’s formation. Hobson’s thesis that imperialism was a mere extension of the capitalist system which exploited the working class for the benefit of the aristocratic class had soon won adherents from the Labour Party. But on the whole, this neo-Marxist view whose main advocate in 1925 was Stafford Cripps, who would be Chancellor of the Exchequer 1947-50, carried little influence in pre-war period.

The second opinion was held by some Party members who maintained pro-imperialist views that resembled those of the Conservative Party’s convinced imperialists. Up until the 1920s, this group called for the formation of a tightly organised imperial federation acting as a world power bloc and for a co-ordinated imperial economic policy. The former idea of political federation was mainly supported by the influential trade unionist Ernest Bevin, while the related idea of economic federation attracted many leading figures from the Labour Party among whom were R. MacDonald, E. Bevin (from 1929 to 1931) and Oswald Mosley. The development of British industry and the relief of British unemployment constituted the primary concerns of those members. Colonial industrial development was, thus, welcomed as long as the colonial industries did not compete with their British counterparts as urged by E. Bevin in the Colonial Development Committee set up under the Development Act of 1929 (Goldsworthy, 1971: 115).

Between the two extremes, there laid the third stance represented by some prominent members in the Labour Party and described broadly as liberal-humanitarians. This included Norman Angell, Leonard Barns, Roden Buxton, E. D. Morel, the Fabian Lord Olivier who was a former Governor of Jamaica, Norman Leys and MacGregor Ross who

both lived in Kenya and wrote about it, and Leonard Woolf, a former Civil Servant who served for many years as secretary to Buxton's chairman of the Imperial Advisory Committee of the Labour Party. Within Parliament, the humanitarian view was endorsed by a small group of MPs led by Jones after his election in 1935. The humanitarians were generally as Goldsworthy noted "free traders, and anti-imperialists in the restricted sense that they denounced the abuses of the Crown Colony system and advocated eventual self-government" (1971: 115).

Granting independence to the British colonies was not an immediate object for the liberal-humanitarians, but instead they favoured the principle of trusteeship. They called for the economic and political development of the colonies as well as the welfare of the native populations and they opposed any form of exploitation. It should be noted that the ideas of the liberal-humanitarians made little real-impact on the attitudes of the leadership of the Labour Party which saw no pressing need for action in the economic, political and social fields in the inter-war period. The liberal-humanitarian ideas, however, did permeate the several statements on colonial policy issued by the Party during opposition. Tracing the evolution of Labour's colonial policy pronouncements throughout the period 1918-45 helps understand Labour's colonial policy after 1945 when Labour first won majority in Parliament and first appointed a liberal-humanitarian as a Colonial Minister.

3. Labour's Policy Evolution 1918-45

Labour's anti-colonial credentials can be attributed to the inherent neo-Marxist tinge, evidenced in the colonial policy papers published by the Party. In the 1920 colonial conference, the Party opposed the militarism and the oppression used by the then British government in the colonies and expressed its sympathy with the people under subjection. It denied "the right of any government to govern against the will of the majority" (The Labour Party, 1920). Another anti-imperialist resolution was carried out at the Labour Party conference on 21 June 1921 declaring that imperialism tended 'to perpetuate the reign of capitalism'. Although this resolution had fundamentally domestic concerns, the Party leaders stressed that it had an anti-imperialist bias (Gupta, 1975: 29).

With specific reference to Africa, the Party published *the Empire in Africa: Labour's Policy*. This policy paper was drafted by Buxton and Woolf of the Imperial Advisory Committee, and it was the first paper to deal in an exclusive way and in some detail with colonial problems. The Party argued that the African colonies were acquired in the last two decades of the nineteenth century as a highly developed stage of economic imperialism carried out by the great European powers (The Labour Party, 1926: 2). British possessions in Africa provided markets and source of raw materials for British industry and profitable fields of investment for British capital. British imperialist policy, it was said therefore, was based on the exploitation of tropical possessions for the benefit of British industry and capital.

The Labour Party policy paper stressed the main liberal themes: the abhorrence of exploitation and radical injustice, the ideal of economic self-development of the African territories within the context of trusteeship, and eventually a very cautious programme for self-government which should be initiated by granting the natives representation on legislative councils to be followed later by giving 'responsibility' to the councils to manage the local government (The Labour Party, 1926: 7-9). Labour also criticised the

British government for the exploitation and marginalisation of native Africans, and called for “*the education of the native so that he may take his place as a free man both in the economic and political system imposed upon Africa*” (The Labour Party, 1926: 3). Nevertheless, this did not extend to call for the independence of the African colonies.

It was during WWII, in particular, that the Labour Party pressed its anti-imperialist image, especially in relation to West Africa. The so-called ‘good’ relations between the Labour Party and WASU resulted in the creation of the West African Parliamentary Committee. The latter was a sort of link between WASU and Labour MPs through which West African issues were funnelled to British Parliament. Moreover, in June 1944, Labour chief spokesman on colonial matters Jones expressed his sympathy with colonial peoples and proposed “*a new relationship with colonial peoples which conveys the idea of equality and fellowship*” (cited in Nwaubani, 1993: 199). His call to improve relations with the colonies and adopt a positive policy towards them did not suggest he supported full independence for the colonies. Rather, his appeal was an attitude proposed to be adopted by the British government within the context of trusteeship.

It was, partly, because of these occasional Labour declarations that the Labour Party gained its ‘assumed’ anti-imperialist reputation before WWII. However, in none of the above resolutions did the Party consider giving up the empire and granting the British colonies in Africa full independence. Although the issue of self-determination was raised by Labour during WWI, it was meant specifically for the Irish and the Indians. This did not extend to include the sub-Saharan Africans for, in Labour’s words, it was ‘impracticable’ to leave them “to settle their own destinies” (The Labour Party, 1919a: 51). For these colonies in tropical Africa, the Party recommended the constitution of an African Federation State to be administered by the League of Nations.

The reason behind Labour’s indifference to self-government for African peoples can be attributed to its leaders’ conviction of the incapability of the “black” races to govern themselves and therefore colonial tutelage was essential as E.D. Morel suggested (The Labour Party, 1919b: 86-8). By WWII, Labour’s approach to West African issues seemed to undergo a slight change after the Imperial Advisory Committee stressed the need to introduce western democratic institutions and trade unions to West Africa. This seeming friendliness to West Africa which would presumably lead to the introduction of democracy in the region was soon to collapse when the Party Conference of 1939 did not adopt the Committee’s ideals.

The Conference resolution singled out the West Indies to be advanced towards self-government, and for the African colonies “inhabited by peoples of primitive culture”, it stressed the need “to foster native institutions and encourage self-government, and the medical and other social services” (cited in Gupta, 1975: 265). This complete silence on the question of equality and non-discrimination towards Africans showed that up to the beginning of WWII, Labour still held to its “racial” belief of the “inferior” status of the African peoples.

Labour’s approach to West African issues throughout the inter-war period was gradually characterised by disregard to the demand of the West African political elites for immediate self-government and a focus on the continuity of British colonial control until the Africans would learn to take care of themselves. Nonetheless, the latter step, according to Labour, would not be achieved in any close time to come. This view was expressed in

the 1943 post-WWII Labour Policy paper for the colonies. The paper stated that: *“In Africa, Great Britain and other European States are responsible for the direct government for an immense expanse of territory and millions of Africans, whose economic and political systems are so backward that they are not yet able to stand by themselves”*. (The Labour Party, 1943: 2)

Therefore, the Party believed that the Africans would not be ready for self-government for a considerable time to come. The rhetoric certainly did not indicate that Labour represented a shift in colonial policy.

Anticipating an early general election following the end of WWII, three speakers representing the main British political parties namely the Conservative, Labour and Liberal parties, expressed their views on the future of the British African colonies at combined meetings of the Royal African and Royal Empire Societies. Speaking for the Liberals was Lord Rennell who delivered his speech on 28 March 1945. He stated that he was glad *“that the Prime Minister has made it clear that there is not the slightest intention of liquidating the British Empire, and the Secretary of State in a recent speech has added that our colonial administration is not to be shared with other people”* (Rennell, Jones & Ponsonby, 1945: 109). Here, Rennell fully backed his Party’s view of the African Empire which should not be relinquished and expressed his satisfaction with the British colonial policy in Africa. The Liberals maintained that the British administration of colonial matters had been effective, and therefore it should not be altered, shared or replaced by any other type of administration (alluding here to international control).

In his turn, Jones who spoke on behalf of the Labour Party on 25 April affirmed to his audience that *“Labour does believe either in disintegrating the Colonial Empire... or in transferring the administration of British territories to any other power or international authority”* (Rennell, Jones & Ponsonby, 1945: 114). This was a clear declaration that Labour in 1945 had no intention to give up Britain’s colonies in Africa. Jones, rather, recognised the necessity of the economic development of the colonies to be planned and managed by the British government. The same view was shared by the Conservatives who in the words of the MP C.E. Ponsonby insured that the aim of his party over the next fifty years was to train the African and the Indian in methods of local government through introducing local native councils (Rennell, Jones & Ponsonby, 1945: 117). Generally speaking, a line of agreement on African colonial issues could be discerned among the main British political parties following the end of WWII and shortly before a general election in Britain.

The same could be said of the 1945 general election’s manifestos written by the three parties in relation to the colonies in Africa and the British empire in general. The Conservatives devoted a whole section to the issues of the British empire and the Commonwealth. On the whole, they promised to carry on economic and political development of the colonies to attain the welfare of the native inhabitants (Craig, 1974: 114). The Liberal Party also had the British Commonwealth as a second agenda in its manifesto. It pledged to help developing the colonies in recognition of their invaluable service during WWI. On the principle of trusteeship, the party promised to *“consider first the interest of their peoples and encourage economic development and self-government in association with the Commonwealth”* (Craig, 1974: 132). In contrast, Labour’s manifesto did not include a specific section to address the British empire and Commonwealth

matters. Rather, a vague sub-section entitled “A World of Progress and Peace” was incorporated where the Party sketched broadly the objectives of its foreign policy in general. In closing this sub-section, Labour mentioned in the very last paragraph of this part that upon its election to office, the Party would seek to promote the planned progress of the colonial dependencies. As such, colonial affairs did not get enough attention in Labour’s agenda and were not a priority for running an electoral campaign at least.

It is thus obvious that in 1945 none of the parties considered seriously taking political measures to transfer the political power to sovereign African governments, even within fifty years. Even in terms, of rhetoric, as indicated in the parties’ manifestos, the Labour Party was the most equivocal, the least forthcoming. It was not until 1954 that Labour devoted a full session of that year’s conference to colonial matters instead of discussing them merely as part of general international affairs.

4. The Labour Government and the Political Change in British West Africa 1945-51

For British decision-makers, self-government came to mean the steady devolution of political power from the colonial government to the local legislative institutions which would eventually install a sovereign parliament. Accordingly, representation and decision-making are believed to be very crucial to ensure that legitimacy is incorporated into the political process. The aim of the discussion here is to show how far the Labour government was ready to apply such a notion of self-government in the British West African colonies. In other words, how far did the constitutional changes introduced in the West African region meet the hopes of the indigenous peoples and institutions who assumed Labour to be anti-colonial?

As late as 1949, there was little genuine commitment to export the Westminster model of government to Africa. Clement Attlee, the then Labour Prime Minister, considered the concentration and the centralisation of powers in the Westminster parliamentary model a threat to democracy, and therefore dangerous for the African colonies. He noted that “it would have been wiser in India to have followed the model of the United States constitution....

This sort of mistake should not be repeated in Africa” (cited in Hyman, 1988: 152). Instead his government sought to promote a political system based on the local government strategy. The latter was seen as a starting point whereby the Africans would be trained and prepared for “political responsibility” to manage their own affairs (Kelemen, 2007: 77). Therefore, a responsible government, and not self-government, policy constituted the central purpose of the post- WWII Labour government. The latter viewed self-government as something not to be hurried on. To quote Benabdi: to manage its colonies in Africa, “*the [British] colonial administration notably relied on the indirect rule system, which consisted in using the traditional elite to rule...the population*”. (Benabdi, 2018: 44)

Indeed, at a weekend conference¹ held in April 1946 by the Fabian Colonial Bureau (FCB)² and as a response to the colonials' growing discontent with the Labour government's policies, Hinden, one of the architects of the FCB who wrote much of the Bureau's journal, expressed in her working paper to the conference her reservations about the prospect of "complete independence" under the twentieth century international economic conditions. At the conference, she disagreed with Nkrumah, the future leader of the Gold Coast, and said:

When Mr Nkrumah said 'we want absolute independence' it left me absolutely cool. Why? British socialists are not so concerned with ideals like independence and self-government, but with the idea of social justice. When British socialists look at the Eastern Europe of today they ask themselves whether independence is itself a worth-while aim. (cited in Gupta, 1975: 326)

In other words, what the FCB did was to defend the Labour government colonial outlooks, and thus it was regarded by its critics (the nationalists) as the government's uncritical supporter. The Bureau's opposition to the demands of self-government were usually on the grounds that the problems related to the colonies especially in Africa were simply not amenable to rapid solution.

It is worthy to note that "*the major element that moulded the colonial ... policy was the economic conditions of the colonies, and the legal steps that were taken were economically-oriented*" (Beghdadi, 2018: 111). For both the Labour government and the FCB, introducing a system of local government and pursuing the economic development of the West African colonies was the chief goal in order to imbue Africans with "a sense of community obligation" and enable them to acquire experience in civic responsibility. To this end, Nigeria and the Gold Coast were given new constitutions in 1946. It is important to have a close look at these constitutions because they show how far the Labour government was willing to go in terms of constitutional advance in West Africa.

Explained by its author Governor Arthur F. Richards, the object of the Nigerian constitution was "to bridge the gulf between the people and the government by a measure of decentralisation and by a widening of the basis of representation which will bring the established native authorities within the legislative machine" (CO. 1945: 2). In framing his constitutional proposals, Richards admitted that he avoided adopting the Westminster model in Nigeria. He was, rather, convinced that political progress could only be achieved by "the real and practical training" of the "native institutions" (Ibid. 6).

¹ The Conference was attended by Fabian experts and colonial critics from Africa and the West Indies who were strongly represented including Kwame Nkrumah who was a leading member at the Pan-African Conference in Manchester.

² The FCB was a policy group established by the Fabian Society in 1940 to clearly define British left-wing thinking on imperialism and the British empire. Its first chairman was Arthur Creech Jones. Though not a formal element of the Labour Party machinery, the FCB became closely associated with the Labour Party and dominated its relationship with the Colonial Office throughout the life of the 1945 Parliament. For further details about the Bureau, see: (Goldsworthy, 1971: 123-7); C. Lydia Riley, (2017). "The Winds of Change Are Blowing Economically: The Labour Party and British Overseas Development 1940s-1960s" in Andrew W.M. Smith and Chris Jeppesen, *Britain, France and Decolonisation of Africa*. London: University College London, 49-53.

Under this constitution, Nigeria was divided into three regions: North, West and East. Each province had a Regional Council which consisted of a House of Assembly. The North, however, had in addition a House of Chiefs. In the House of Assembly of the Northern Region, there were nineteen official members and twenty unofficials of whom fourteen provincial members chosen by the native authorities, while the other six unofficials were nominated by the Governor.

The House of Chiefs, on the other hand, was composed of the Chief Commissioner as president, thirteen First Class Chiefs and twenty-nine Second Class Chiefs. The Western House of Assembly consisted of fourteen official members and fifteen unofficials. The latter were classified as follows: three chiefs (appointed by the Governor after consultation with the chiefs of the West Region), seven provincial members selected by the native authorities, and the remaining five unofficial members were nominated by the Governor. The Eastern House of Assembly had thirteen official members and fourteen unofficial members (nine provincial members selected by the native authorities and the other five were nominated by the Governor). It should be noted that all the unofficial members in the three Houses of Assembly were of African descent.

The constitution also set up a Legislative Council constituted of twenty official members and twenty-nine unofficials representing the three regions in Nigeria (from the four aforementioned bodies nominated by their unofficial members respectively), and the other four remaining members were Europeans nominated by the Governor to represent different interests like banking and mining (CO. 1945: 7-11). Under the Gold Coast constitution of 1946, the Legislative Council was formed of a new membership. The Council comprised a president (who was the Governor), six official members, six nominated unofficial members (divided equally among the Europeans and the natives), and twenty-four African unofficials (of whom eighteen were elected).

A clear unofficial African majority could be noted, yet given the fact that the native authorities were centralised, this majority in both Nigeria and the Gold Coast was considered by Nwaubani a sham (1993: 202). Besides the Legislative Council, Provincial Councils for the East and West were established, consisting of the native states' paramount chiefs. At the bottom of the organisational pyramid was a Joint Provincial Council made up of the paramount chiefs of the Colony and native authority members who did not belong to the native states, in addition to the heads of certain Kumasi clans. Thus, all of the three councils' membership was entirely confined to the chiefs, who in turn elected the eighteen unofficial African members of the Legislative Council. This reinforced the concept of traditional system of representation which was promoted by the colonial power.

Back in 1939, the Secretary of State for Colonies, Malcolm MacDonald, had been anxious about how to bring harmony between the Legislative Councils and the native authorities within the same territories. The resolution to this problem came from the post-war Labour government as clarified in the constitutions outlined above. In terms of membership, the regional assemblies' members were selected from the native authorities, and the assemblies in turn were kind of electoral colleges for the legislatures. In terms of structure, Labour's approach presented the native authorities as local government agencies which would be grouped together in a form of central native council. Hence, to its supporters this approach generated a connection between the regional councils and the central legislative councils (Nwaubani, 1993: 202-3).

To the critics of Labour's approach, this system of representation introduced by the 1946 constitutions was short of value as it over-depended on the traditional chiefs, and by extension on indirect rule as well. This contributed to the marginalisation of the educated elites, which led later to a growing anger among the Nigerians. One of the critics was Abubakar Iman, editor of the government-owned Hausa daily newspaper, *Gaskiya Ta Fi Kwabo*. He reported that the new constitution did not bring any fundamental change to the old indirect system of rule, and therefore it was seen as the old Chiefs' Conference in a new form but for the same purpose (Imam, 1946: 22).

The same problem arose in the Gold Coast. Here also people criticised the new constitution for giving more importance to the chiefs while neglecting the educated men. The issue was put into its proper perspective by the Watson Commission which was sent to enquire into the causes of the Gold Coast riots in 1948 (Dani, 2016: 440). The Commission attributed the crisis to the "feeling of political frustration among the educated Africans who saw no prospect of ever experiencing political power under existing conditions" (Imam, 1946: 22). It noted that *"A failure of the Government to realise that with the spread of liberal ideas, increasing literacy and a closer contact with political developments in other parts of the world, the star of rule through the chiefs was on the wane"*. (Nwaubani, 1993: 203)

This deliberate marginalisation of the African educated elements from the representative system was part of the Labour government colonial policy. The direct link between local authorities and the central legislatures was designed to circumvent the educated Africans. In the words of Creech Jones, opening representation to the elites *"may result in the creation of a class of professional African politicians absorbed in the activities in the centre and out of direct touch with the people themselves"* (Circular No. 41, 23 February 1947, CO 847/ 35/472341). Therefore, a chain of representation from the people to the legislative councils, Jones observed, could be secured through regional councils. In the view of the 1945 Labour government, the aim of this local government policy was to prevent the creation of a strong central government in the West African colonies, given the fact that the Party was against centralisation of power in West Africa (Nwaubani, 1993: 204).

It should be noted that in spite of the declared attention devoted to the development of the local government, eventually no reform of the system was undertaken by the Labour government. M. G. Smith claimed that in 1950 the government of Zaria in Northern Nigeria was "an autocracy ineffectively supervised by the British" (Nwaubani, 1993: 204). In the Gold Coast, both the 1948 Watson and the 1949 Coussey commissions urged the replacement of the native authorities by more democratic elected councils. Kofi Busia also commented on the situation in the Gold Coast by pointing out that too much attention was devoted to developing the Legislative Council at the expense of the local authorities (Nwaubani, 1993: 204).

The 1946 constitutions were said to train the West African natives and prepare them for responsible government by securing them unofficial majorities in the legislative councils (increasing African representation). In reality, however, the Gold Coast and Nigeria remained far from self-government as the executive councils were independent and not accountable to the legislative councils. The governors still had the right to legislate bills and veto legislations that they disapproved. This state of affairs was to continue for

the next nine years, the period allotted to the Nigerian constitution to run. This is again to say that colonial rule in West Africa still had time to run its course.

It is quite clear that the colonial policy of the Labour Party was neither innovative nor did it involve any revolutionary break with indirect rule. The latter was based on the principle of sustainability and utilisation of local African institutions as agents of rule, but in practice it only ensured a ‘business’ relationship between the native chiefs and the colonial officials. Technically, therefore, the system of indirect rule was antithetical to the establishment of a parliament or any political institutions at the centre, and thus it stood against any semblance of self-government.³ In the Nigerian Legislative debates of 25 March 1947, Abubakar Tawafa Balewa, the Second Member for the Northern Provinces in Legislative Council in Nigeria and the would-be Nigeria’s first Prime Minister during 1957-66, asked the chief Secretary to the Nigerian government about the essence of the existing indirect rule system in Northern Provinces and its immediate aims. The chief Secretary’s answer was:

The policy of the system of Indirect Rule practices in the Northern Provinces is to organise and improve indigenous administrative institutions [so] as to form an efficient administration based upon modern conceptions, which will eventually be fitted to bear the entire responsibility for all administrative action in the area. The immediate aims of the system are identified with the long term policy and their achievement - as for instance the closer identification of Native Authorities with the Government of Nigeria by means of the new Constitution – represents successive steps towards the ultimate goal. (cited in Whitaker, 1970: 54)

The Chief Secretary’s reply was a clear indication that the native authorities (the chiefs) were still seen by the colonial government as the institutional heirs of the British control.

The Labour government’s concentration on the chief’s aid and its commitment to indirect rule as late as 1946 could only mean that real political reforms were considered not to be urgent. It was the activism of the educated elements, however, which made the issue of reform and decolonisation in the West African colonies a matter of serious politics in London. More specifically, the tensions in the Gold Coast in 1948 forced the British to rethink their colonial policy in West Africa and reconsider their long deliberate reticence regarding the future of the African colonies. Harold Cooper, a former colonial official, recorded that “we were living in a dream until the disorders of 1948 catapulted us into wakefulness” (Cooper, 1956: 73).

On 28 February 1948, the economic grievances of ex-servicemen and cocoa farmers culminated in a mass demonstration in Accra and the other major towns later. As a consequence, violence broke out and a state of emergency was declared (Fage, 1969: 209). A commission led by Aiken Watson was set up to enquire into the disturbances. In its report, the Watson Commission proposed immediate constitutional reforms to be made in

³ For further details about the indirect rule, see F. Lugard, (1922). *The Daul Mandate in British Tropical Africa*. London: William Blackwood and Sons.

order to devolve substantial power to the natives in the Gold Coast. In 1949, its recommendations were referred to an all-African committee headed by J. Henley Coussey who embarked on working out the details of a new constitution for the Gold Coast. The outcome was a new constitution adopted in 1950 and which “conferred upon the Gold Coast a greater measure of responsibility for her own internal affairs...” (Nwaubani, 2001: 7). The constitution made the Executive Council responsible to the Legislative and granted the natives a majority in both bodies. The Governor lost his seat in the Legislative Council (Nwaubani, 2001: 7; Gupta, 1975: 333).

A similar decision to revise the Nigerian constitution was undertaken by the new Governor J. Macpherson and the new Chief Secretary Hugh Foot. This was initiated on the grounds that political development in the Gold Coast would certainly have repercussions in Nigeria. Effectively, Nigeria was given a new constitution in 1951, which also increased African representation in the administrative councils.

The historical significance of those constitutions laid in the fact that they marked a total shift away from the indirect rule. This ended the pre-eminence of rule through the chiefs and paved the way for self-government in all West Africa later. Although the political progress was monitored by the Labour government, E. Nwaubani argued that the latter was forced to take such a step amid the growing West African nationalism and the rise of some active nationalist figures like Kwame Nkrumah who seemed to enjoy wide acceptance and popularity among his people (1993: 207). Nkrumah’s strong influence was described by Aiden Clarke, who became the Gold Coast Governor in 1949: “*I do not know whether it would have been possible to slow things down and still retain good will; and if that good will had been lost, I wonder whether Ghana would still be a member of the Commonwealth?*”. (1958: 36)

5. Political Parties’ Consensus on Colonial Policy

On 10 November 1942, Winston Churchill, the then British PM, made his famous wartime statement about the future of the British colonial possessions. He declared that he had not “become the King’s First Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire” (Louis, 1977: 8, 200; *The Guardian*, 2009). That was a clear admission by the Conservative Party leader that the prospect of British withdrawal from the colonies was neither desirable nor feasible. The same attitude was equally shared by the Labour Party prior to the end of the War and its election to office. In a speech delivered to the House of Commons on 6 June 1944, Jones said:

Britain today is in the Colonies and she cannot withdraw, nor do I think it desirable that she should. We are pledged, in these colonial territories, to the pursuit of a policy of constructive trusteeship, a policy which is to lead, we hope, to partnership inside the British Commonwealth. (Hansard, 1944: n.p.)

The 1940s witnessed intense American anti-colonial sentiments manifested in the speeches of the American politicians. In response to this, the British politicians exposed strong feelings about the Empire. W.R. Louis noted that not only Churchill and the Conservatives but “members of the Labour Party also held strong convictions” (1977: 14).

Speaking to the Dependent Areas Committee of the U.S. State Department about his approach to the colonial problem in 1945, Jones remarked that both Labour and Conservative parties were then “walking together” as far as colonial issues were concerned (Louis, 1977: 430). The same position was held by Labour’s leader C. Attlee as W.R. Louis pointed out: “*Like his colleague Jones, Attlee on the colonial issue stands out for less as a Labour ideologue than as an Englishman who chose to close ranks against the Americans*”. (1977: 464)

The notion of ideological distinction between the Labour and the Conservative parties could be hardly noticed with regard to colonial issues. It is instructive to recall the opening statement addressed by the Liberal Lord Rennell at the 1945 combined meetings to discuss British colonial policy in Africa. Rennell claimed that:

If this series of addresses was intended to produce three different political standards of African and colonial administration generally, I rather suspect that this audience will be disappointed because I think there is much less diversity between the three political aspects of colonial administration than many people think. (Rennell, Jones & Ponsonby, 1945: 107)

Therefore, it is safe to reiterate W.M. Macmillan’s saying that British colonial policy was “*an expression of undivided national will*” (Nwaubani, 1993: 211).

The unity of will was alluded to in the Secretary of State for the Colonies Oliver Stanley’s policy declaration of July 1943 on the central purpose of British colonial development. Stanley pledged to lead the colonial people along the road to self-government, but under the supervision of the British government and within the framework of British Empire. This, according to him, could not be attained without the social and economic development of the colonies. Once the colonial peoples, Stanley affirmed, were trained in the use and the development of their resources, just then political advance would be considered. He also regarded the extension of the local government as a crucial and basic method for the extension of the central government. Thenceforth, British colonial policy remained shaped by these principles, regardless of party differences. (Hansard, 1943: n.p.)

These principles were reiterated by Labour’s Secretary of State for the Colonies George Hall, in the Party’s first colonial policy statement of 1946. Hall endorsed Stanley’s pronouncement considering the development of the colonies and its resources as a prerequisite to attain “responsible government”. The latter goal, according to Labour, would not be reached in the short-term. Instead, immense tasks of “development” were to be taken within the context of a prolonged “benevolent” colonial relationship.

Following Hall’s address to the House of Commons, representatives in the House observed that colonial policy had become an uncontested issue between the Labour and the Conservative parties. Hall himself suggested that the colonial policy of Labour did not mark any break with the past. Moreover, he acknowledged the work carried out by his predecessor O. Stanley in the British colonies which would form the basis for future colonial planning (Hansard, 1949: n.p.).

When the Conservative Party returned to government in 1951, the new Secretary of State for the Colonies; Oliver Lyttleton, noted that some broad lines of the British colonial

policy were unanimously agreed upon by all sections of the House of Commons as being above party politics. He stressed two main principles:

First, we all aim at helping the colonial territories attain self-government within the British Commonwealth.... Second, we are all determined to pursue the economic and social development of the colonial territories so that it keeps pace with their political development. (Hansard, *ibid.*)

As such, colonial policy remained a matter of general agreement between Labour and the Conservative governments, and Labour did not make any concrete new departures.

6. Conclusion

The earliest interpretations of British decolonisation dating back to the late 1950s had presented the Labour Party as playing a major role in unscrambling the empire. The chief limitation of this historiographical genre is its lack of objectivity as it did not make use of primary sources. Access to the latter has recently permitted historians like S. Howe, P.S. Gupta, D. Goldsworthy and N.

Owen to offer alternative historical interpretations of the part related to the Labour Party and the process of decolonisation (through revealing new details and facts). But only few of these accounts, like those of R. Hyam and E. Nwaubani, focused on Labour's role in Africa in general and West Africa in particular. This part remains under-researched, and despite the fact that some of the research has been done so far, it came to reinforce the old interpretation that assigned Labour a positive role in the African continent, such as the writings of R. D. Pearce and R. Robinson. In this respect, Chaami and Grazib have noted that *"within the last thirty years, (hi-)story is subject for a postmodern examination"*. (2019: 137)

The backbone of the argument in this paper has been to show that the Labour Party's period in government in 1945-51 did not mark a new move towards decolonisation in West Africa. On the contrary, the Party adhered to the political, economic, social and ideological constituents that defined the culture of imperialism. Its approach to colonial problems was not different from that of the Conservatives. Both parties considered the empire a national symbol which was difficult to get rid of. J. Darwin stated that both parties saw the colonies as an opportunity for planned redevelopment, especially in post-WWII era (Darwin, 1988: 72-3).

More specifically, this study argues that the idea of pursuit of progress in West Africa being the result of the Labour Party's policy in 1945-51 is untrue. Instead, the situation was forced on the government. On the whole, it is safe to mention that contradictions and duplicity were two main features that characterised Labour's colonial policy. A clear inconsistency could be noticed in Labour's colonial declarations in opposition and once in office. A major influential factor had been British national self-interest.

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