

THE BRITISH LABOUR POLITICIANS AND THE CONSTITUTIONAL QUESTION IN SRI LANKA, 1914-31

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The constitutional question in Sri Lanka has hitherto generally been examined as a matter of the relations between the Sri Lankan leaders and the colonial officials both in the colony and at the Colonial Office. Thus an important aspect of the question, namely, the ties between the local leaders and the British politicians, has not been adequately examined. These ties, especially those with the British labour politicians influenced in several ways the political development in the colony. The Labour politicians who consistently opposed the established policy of the colonial officials towards the reform of the Sri Lankan constitution, held a brief for the local leaders in their controversy with these officials. For a significant study of this Labour impact four outstanding questions have to be examined: (a) the factors which made the Labour politicians interested in Sri Lanka's constitutional question (b) formulation of a Labour policy on this matter (c) the manner in which the Labour politicians moulded the political ideology of the local leaders and their attitudes towards the colonial officialdom and (d) the manner in which they influenced the political development in the colony.

The Labour politicians began to show their interest in the Sri Lanka's political question through the relationship between the Sri Lankan deputation in England¹ and Leonard Woolf, an ex-civil servant of Sri Lanka. E. W. Perera and D. B. Jayatilake came to Woolf and requested him to help them in enlisting the British Government's acceptance of their demand, viz., a royal commission to inquire into measures taken by the Colonial Government during and after the communal riots of 1915. Woolf concluded that the case put forwarded by the Sinhalese politicians was justifiable.² He was determined to procure the sympathy of the British parliamentarians and the Colonial Office towards this demand. As a result of Woolf's interest, the Secretary of State for Colonies received a deputation in January 1918 which included a group of Liberal and Labour MP's, but the Sri Lankan demand

1. Perera and Jayatilake had been deputed by their fellow politicians to secure their demand, viz., a royal commission to inquire into the suppressive measures taken by the Government of Sri Lanka. These two persons lived for a few years in England, and went back on subsequent occasions in order to promote reforms.

2. Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again-An Autobiography of the Years 1911 to 1918* (London, 1968), p. 230.