

BRITAIN AND THE POLITICS OF CEYLON, 1948–1961*

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ABSTRACT. *This article traces the British relationship with Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in the decade and a half after independence. The first part of this article shows how, within the context of the arrangements made at independence, the events of the years 1956–9 under the premiership of S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike marked an important turning point in Britain’s political and strategic relationship with the island. Then in the second part, British diplomatic records relating to Ceylonese politics are used to analyse the British response to Ceylon’s ethno-political crisis during the early 1960s. Britain’s reluctance to respond to this crisis was an outcome of the changed relations with Ceylon brought on during the Bandaranaike era.*

In the last decade, there has been an important change in the historiography of decolonization in South Asia. While the field was for a long time dominated by nation-bound visions of the period centring on the years 1947 and 1948, recent studies have emphasized longer-term continuities and post-partition ambiguities at the expense of clear-cut national narratives.¹ Yet although studies of such major events as partition have become analytically more sophisticated,² research on Ceylon at independence has tended to remain tied to older established frameworks. Meanwhile, important recent work suggests that a clue to some of the major post-1948 ruptures in Ceylon might be found in the way in which the British established themselves as a power within a Ceylonese political-cultural context, which involved breaking extant links between the island and mainland South Asia.³ In a similar way, the present article attempts to

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¹ D. Chakrabarty, R. Majumdar, and A. Sartori, eds., *From the colonial to the postcolonial: India and Pakistan in transition* (Oxford, 2007); P. Duara, *Decolonization: perspectives from now and then* (London, 2004).

² See for example J. Chatterji, *Spoils of partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967* (Cambridge, 2007).

³ S. Sivasundaram, *Islanded: Britain, Sri Lanka, and the bounds of an Indian Ocean colony* (Chicago, IL, 2013).

show how British policies with respect to post-independence Ceylon were to a large extent governed by considerations that were separate to their views of India.

Besides making clear Ceylon's importance to British plans after independence, this article also aims to fill a more general gap in the scholarship concerning the post-independence political relationship between Britain and South Asia, which has tended to overlook Ceylon.⁴ While significant work has been produced on the dynamics of Britain's separation from its former colonies and the place of shifting world currents underlying these dynamics, which have attempted to take in both South Asian perspectives as well as those of Whitehall, attention to Ceylon has been strikingly absent.⁵ This is particularly surprising when we consider Ceylon's strategic importance near the centre of Britain's still visible Indian Ocean imperium as well as its contribution to British trade and commerce in the decade and a half after 1948.⁶ By focusing on British perspectives on the changing relationship with Ceylon, particularly during the turbulent late 1950s and early 1960s, this article also aims to shed new light on the official British attitude towards South Asia during this period. The uncertain political conditions in which the British handed over their rule to native leaders amounted to a 'gamble' against which they weighed the commercial and strategic benefits of relinquishing direct authority.⁷ The gamble may well have paid off in the early years of independence as far as the British were concerned, but, as this article will argue, the coming to power of a new political regime in Ceylon from the late 1950s quite dramatically altered the scope of British influence and the benefits of association, both within the country and in the wider region.⁸ In terms of what Britain could still hope to do in and through Ceylon, the leftward, neutralist turn under S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike's government changed the political landscape irrevocably. His widow Sirimavo's first government, which took power a year after his assassination in 1960, deepened and substantiated those changes.

⁴ The name 'Ceylon' will be used to refer to the state unless the context is after 1972, when it was renamed 'Sri Lanka'.

⁵ The best modern account of Britain's post-war relationship with Ceylon is the article by S. R. Ashton, 'Ceylon', in J. M. Brown and W. R. Louis, eds., *Oxford history of the British empire*, IV: *The twentieth century* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 447–64.

⁶ See P. M. McGarr, *The Cold War in South Asia: Britain, the United States and the Indian subcontinent, 1945–1965* (Cambridge, 2013); and A. I. Singh, *The limits of British influence: South Asia and the Anglo-American relationship, 1947–1956* (London, 1993). McGarr's excellent study makes no mention of Ceylon in the index. Singh describes South Asia as 'India and Pakistan from 15 August 1947, when the British transferred power to two successor states on the subcontinent' (p. xi).

⁷ Chiefs of Staff, 'Ceylon constitution', 5 May 1947, CAB 129/18/47, UK National Archives (NA); Ashton, 'Ceylon', p. 448.

⁸ There are interesting political and chronological parallels with developments in the 'old' dominions. See A. G. Hopkins, 'Rethinking decolonization', *Past and Present*, 200 (2008), pp. 211–47.

In contrast to major work on the foreign policy of independent Ceylon, this article does not seek to downplay the extent of changes made during the Bandaranaike era. For example, the eminent historian of Sri Lanka K. M. De Silva has emphasized pragmatic concerns in the development of Ceylonese foreign policy during the first post-independence decade. This means that ‘there is a striking continuity between the foreign policy of the Senanayakes in the early years of independence and that of Bandaranaike’. He even describes D. S. Senanayake as the first Sri Lankan prime minister to practise ‘non-alignment and neutralism’, challenging the notion that it was Bandaranaike who inaugurated this turn in Ceylon’s foreign policy. De Silva follows the political scientist A. J. Wilson in viewing the continuity of policy as a necessary consequence of Ceylon’s restricted movements as a small state. Within this broader geopolitical context, however, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike was held to be able to achieve several symbolic sleights of hand as prime minister because of ‘rapid changes in the country’s political life and in its external political environment’ at the time that he came to power.⁹ The present article shifts ground from questions of chiefly domestic importance to look instead at Ceylon’s post-imperial relationship with Britain. As such, it touches upon Ceylon’s growth as a regional and global territory.¹⁰ In the same manner, this article strikes a different course to recent studies by Harshan Kumarasingham that have focused on British constitutional arrangements in post-independence Ceylon, the differences between Ceylon and other South Asian states, and how these have shaped Ceylon’s political history.¹¹ While attention will also be paid at points to the growing conflict between Sinhalese religious nationalism and Tamil elite nationalism, the focus of attention will be on what most exercised British opinion in the Anglo-Ceylon relationship, and why.¹² In this respect,

⁹ K. M. De Silva, *History of Sri Lanka* (New Delhi, 2005), pp. 623, 635, 638. See also Ian Barrow, ‘Finding the nation in assassination: the death of S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike and the assertion of a Sinhalese Sri Lankan identity’, *The Historian* 76 (2014), pp. 784–802. Nira Wickramasinghe’s analysis emphasizes Bandaranaike’s predecessor Sir John Kotelawala’s pro-British sentiments, which will be challenged here. Nira Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka in the modern age: a history* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 233–4.

¹⁰ There is an older literature that attends to this in part. See for example K. M. De Silva, ‘Sri Lanka: the security problems of a small state’, *Defence and Peace Economics*, 10 (1999), pp. 361–81.

¹¹ See Harshan Kumarasingham, *A political legacy of the British empire: power and the parliamentary system in post-colonial India and Sri Lanka* (London, 2012); Harshan Kumarasingham, ‘The jewel of the east yet has its flaws: the deceptive tranquillity surrounding Sri Lankan independence’, *Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics*, 72 (2013); Harshan Kumarasingham, ‘The “tropical dominions”: the appeal of dominion status in the decolonization of India, Pakistan and Ceylon’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 23 (2013), pp. 223–45.

¹² British engagement with Ceylon’s ethno-politics is examined through a Commonwealth lens in L. M. Ratnapalan, ‘“Why disgrace the Commonwealth?” Ceylonese communalism, the search for global influence and the politics of a transnational organisation, 1948–1965’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* (forthcoming).

during the period studied the question of the status of Ceylon's so-called 'Estate' or 'Indian' Tamils was probably of more regional import, although, as we shall see, this too was generally of secondary concern to the British. Finally, assessing the limits of British intervention in post-colonial South Asia also means engaging, to some extent, with the overlapping chronologies of decolonization and cold war that marked these years.¹³

The first part of this article will trace the Anglo-Ceylonese relationship from independence to the coming to power of Bandaranaike's new government in 1956 to show how the latter marked an important moment in Britain's political and strategic relationship with the South Asian region.¹⁴ In the period between independence and Bandaranaike's government, there was a gradual wearing down of British influence and military power in Ceylon, which became decisive with the formal handover of British bases on the island in 1957. The second part of the article will analyse the British response to Ceylon's ethno-political crisis during the following period. It will argue that, while the British were concerned with the worsening direction of Sinhalese–Tamil relations and the structure of government in Ceylon, they realized that little could be done about these things. Britain's former power in Ceylon had granted it knowledgeable officials on the ground, but now they could do no more than observe and report.

I

As is now well understood, the public face of British decolonization policy with respect to independent South Asia (as well as to other parts of Asia and Africa) was one of modernization and partnership.¹⁵ The Commonwealth, in particular, was reconceptualized as 'a world-wide experiment in nation building'¹⁶ in order to raise defences against the expansion of communism in the post-colonial world.¹⁷ Decolonization would be a sign not of the weakening of British connections with the rest of the world but of the maturation of those

¹³ 'South Asia and the Commonwealth', *Round Table*, 90 (2001), pp. 301–7.

¹⁴ The question of chronology assumes greater significance when the South Asian region is compared with other, perhaps better known, Cold War terrains. See T. Judt, 'Whose story is it? The Cold War in retrospect', in *Reappraisals: reflections on the forgotten twentieth century* (New York, NY, 2008), pp. 368–83. See also O. A. Westad, 'The Cold War and the international history of the twentieth century', in M. P. Leffler and O. A. Westad, eds., *Cambridge history of the Cold War*, 1: *Origins* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 1–19, at p. 2.

¹⁵ R. F. Holland, 'The imperial factor in British strategies from Attlee to Macmillan, 1945–1963', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 12 (1984), pp. 165–86; W. R. Louis, 'The dissolution of the British empire', in Brown and Louis, eds., *Oxford history of the British empire*, iv, pp. 328–56.

¹⁶ Quoted in A. Deighton, 'Britain and the Cold War, 1945–1955', in Leffler and Westad, eds., *Cambridge history of the Cold War*, 1, pp. 112–32.

¹⁷ For example, Moore describes the added British incentive in retaining India in the Commonwealth, of staving off communism in South-East Asia. R. J. Moore, *Making the new Commonwealth* (Oxford, 1987), p. 172.

connections and, in the process, a spur to moderate nationalists to seek shelter within the Commonwealth umbrella. The costs of empire had long ceased to make direct rule worthwhile and in the event it was reckoned that a territory like Ceylon would be of more value to Britain as an independent state than as a colony.¹⁸ British calculations depended, to a degree, on the colonial elites' belief that decolonization represented the realization of British policy;¹⁹ the result has been viewed by some as a cynical adjustment to the circumstances and by others as the British acquisition of South Asian goodwill.²⁰ These interpretations tend to treat decolonization as a one-off event, a single moment whose cause must be explained. Yet, as will be shown here, decolonization in Ceylon was much more a process than an event, and, moreover, one whose outcomes only gradually became clear in the fifteen years after formal independence.

As John Darwin has argued, the post-war Labour government's Commonwealth policy was built on reinventing the British world system with a new-found emphasis on Britain's Middle Eastern and tropical empires.²¹ To maintain this Indian Ocean-spanning imperium in the likely scenario of Indian resistance to residual British military manoeuvring, the retention of British bases in Ceylon became highly important. In broad terms, British strategic aims in post-colonial South Asia consisted of keeping rival external powers out of the area by securing the Indian Ocean's gateways east of Suez as far as Australia and preventing the building of bases and other military settlements in the region.²² Military bases and mobility ('airstrips, harbours, and refuelling and supply centres'²³) were the foci of the post-war British strategy in the Indian Ocean. Transit and over-flying rights secured with India and Burma were a part of the new network, created in the wake of the loss of territory but more immediately in the late 1940s to prepare for an air assault in the expected war with the Soviet Union. Equally important in the creation of post-colonial agreements was the idea that, once signed, the new states would be bound not to make subsequent military agreements with the Soviets or other communist powers.²⁴

¹⁸ W. R. Louis and R. Robinson, 'The imperialism of decolonization', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 22 (1994), pp. 462–511.

¹⁹ See *Times*, 10 Feb. 1948, p. 5, in which the writer observes that 'British rule has done much for the island, both economically and politically.'

²⁰ Louis, 'Dissolution of the British empire', p. 329; McGarr, *Cold War in South Asia*, p. 11.

²¹ John Darwin, *Empire project: the rise and fall of the British world-system, 1830–1970* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 553–8. More generally on the evolution of official British foreign policy, see A. N. Porter and A. J. Stockwell, *British imperial policy and decolonization, 1938–1964*, especially vol. II: *1951–1964* (Basingstoke, 1989).

²² P. Darby, *British defence policy east of Suez, 1947–1968* (London, 1973), p. 3; P. S. Gupta, 'British strategic and economic priorities during the negotiations for the transfer of power in South Asia, 1945–1947', *Bangladesh Historical Studies*, 7 (1983), pp. 39–51.

²³ Darby, *British defence policy*, p. 84.

²⁴ R. Aldrich and M. Coleman discuss the important concept of 'deniability to a potential enemy' in 'Britain and the strategic air offensive against the Soviet Union: the question of South Asian air bases, 1945–1949', *History*, 74 (1989), pp. 400–26.

In these hot war conditions, British and Ceylonese leaders struck defence agreements on independence that were understood at the time as being of mutual benefit. According to the British joint chiefs of staff, Ceylon ‘occupies’ a ‘commanding position...in relation to our sea and air communications in the Indian Ocean’, and would ‘In any future war’ be required ‘as a base from which to defend these communications’. Furthermore, Ceylon ‘forms an essential link in our cable and wireless network to Australia and the Far East’ and is ‘the centre of our Naval Intelligence organisations for countries bordering the Indian Ocean’. ‘Inability to use Ceylon...would seriously weaken our control of the Indian Ocean.’ Any grant of independence to Ceylon ‘must’, therefore, ‘be accompanied by reservations which will ensure that our defence requirement will be adequately and permanently met’.²⁵ The cabinet was also mindful of Ceylon’s assistance in preserving British sterling balances and her ability to ‘play her part in strengthening dollar reserves in the sterling area’.²⁶ Strategic considerations were paramount, however, and the Simonstown agreement with South Africa was regarded as a useful precedent for what ‘would ultimately have to be made with the Ceylon government for the safeguarding of our defence requirements in the island’.²⁷

The Colonial Office assessed that Ceylon’s leaders’ fear of Indian dominance encouraged a quick rather than a gradual decolonization. The defence agreement signed on 11 November 1947 between the last British governor of Ceylon, Henry Moore, and Don Stephen Senanayake, the leader of the United National party (UNP) that was expected to take the reins of power, paved the way for the maintenance of British naval and air bases on the island at Trincomalee and Katunayake, respectively. The agreement stated that the governments of the United Kingdom and Ceylon ‘will give to each other such military assistance for the security of their territories, for defence against external aggression and for the protection of essential communications as it may be in their mutual interest to provide’. In exchange for the Ceylon government granting the UK government ‘all the necessary facilities for the objects mentioned...as may be mutually agreed’, the UK would ‘furnish the Government of Ceylon with such mutual assistance as may from time to time be required towards the training and development of Ceylonese armed forces’.²⁸

The agreement was a compromise between British strategic priorities and Senanayake’s need to present himself as having received control over the entirety of Ceylon’s domestic and external affairs. Independence must be seen to be both real and his own achievement. Soon after the announcement of dominion

²⁵ Chiefs of Staff, ‘Ceylon constitution’, 5 May 1947, CAB 129/18/47, NA.

²⁶ Cabinet Conclusions, 13 May 1948, CAB 128/12/32, NA.

²⁷ Cabinet Conclusions, 6 May 1947, CAB 128/9/44, NA.

²⁸ Nicholas Mansergh, ed., *Documents and speeches on British Commonwealth affairs (1931–1952)*, II (London, 1953), pp. 749–50.

status, the formula that was announced for the constitutional handover, Senanayake, as the first prime minister of the new government, remarked in the House of Representatives that 'I cannot think of a better and safer friend for Ceylon than Great Britain.'²⁹ None of these arrangements was particularly new in the history of British decolonization, and an important school of thought holds that the transfer of power in the form of partnership with indigenous elites – in Ceylon's case, particularly the agricultural landholding class of which Senanayake was a distinguished part – was a British policy dating back to the late 1930s.³⁰ The new constitution also held that responsibility for external affairs would be the prerogative of the prime minister, an arrangement that suited the British insofar as they had gambled on Senanayake as their man. Later, Senanayake commented on the defence agreements that, 'We want friends...and we feel that the best friends we could have are the British and other members of the Commonwealth...As a matter of fact, whatever grievances we may have, whatever hardships we have to undergo, there is not the slightest doubt in my mind that the Englishman is the best gentleman we could trust.'³¹

News of the agreement immediately brought protests from the left parties in the Ceylonese parliament. For the Soviet Union, it was enough reason to block Ceylon's entry into the United Nations until 1955, on account of it not being a genuinely independent state. Conversely, this move played into the hands of those advocating security through membership of the Commonwealth. In response to criticism from opposition MPs in Ceylon, Senanayake presented the forging of external defence ties with Britain coupled with entry into the Commonwealth as a necessary means of securing independence in what was held to be a strategically important territory; ties which, in time perhaps, could be scaled down but for the moment were critical in sheltering the new nation and affording it a place of safety from which to learn how to properly conduct international diplomacy.³² In a response to a Trotskyist critic in the House of Representatives he said:

Fortunately, our security is involved in her [Britain's] security. She must keep the Indian Ocean open to her ships and aircraft. These ships and aircraft carry the great mass of supplies which feed and cloth[e] us. Consequently, we are in a position to bargain and I believe we have bargained to good purpose.³³

²⁹ *Times*, 4 Dec. 1947, p. 3. The term 'dominion' was also held to better disguise the loss of British prestige. Kumarasingham, 'Tropical dominions', pp. 229–30, 244.

³⁰ Louis and Robinson, 'Imperialism of decolonization', p. 463.

³¹ H. A. J. Hulugalle, *Don Stephen Senanayake: Sri Lanka's first prime minister* (Colombo, 2000; orig. publ. 1975), p. 204.

³² 'Prime Minister D. S. Senanayake's speech in the House of Representatives on the motion on the independence of Ceylon', in A. Jayawardane, *Documents on Sri Lanka's foreign policy, 1947–1965* (Colombo, 2005), pp. 67–72; W. H. Wriggins, *Ceylon: dilemmas of a new nation* (New Delhi, 1980; orig. publ. 1960), p. 391; De Silva, 'Sri Lanka', p. 362.

³³ Hulugalle, *Senanayake*, p. 223.

Meanwhile the future prime minister, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, who was to rescind the agreement and take back the bases in 1957, at the time of independence gave his support as a minister in Senanayake's first government.³⁴

A sense of the post-war Labour government's perspective on relations with independent Ceylon is given by Patrick Gordon Walker, who as parliamentary under-secretary of state at the Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO) was sent to South Asia in 1948 to secure acceptance of the London Declaration, which cemented the foundations of the 'New Commonwealth'. Walker witnessed the independence celebrations in Ceylon and observed that although there was some criticism of the nature of the freedom gained (he noted slogans such as 'Real, not fake, independence' written on a few walls), the theme of 'loyalty and rejoicing' was much stronger.³⁵ Senanayake was 'in the genuine tradition of Dominion Prime Ministers: deeply committed to the British connexion', and should be assisted in his work by a soft British approach to diplomacy with the new dominion. The new prime minister's worries about the defence agreement concerned – rightly, as it turned out – the likelihood of its prejudicing Ceylon's entry into the United Nations Organization, as well as its adequacy in fending off excessive Indian influence in Ceylon's affairs. As an issue of mutual trust, the latter was an issue that was to exercise Jawarhalal Nehru a great deal in subsequent years. For Gordon Walker, there was no doubt that the course of Britain's relationship with Ceylon would depend on setting the right tone from the start. 'It is hardly too much to say that if we treat them strictly as a Dominion, they will behave very like a loyal colony; whereas if we treat them as a colony we may end in driving them out of the Commonwealth.' To this end, he suggested that all negotiations should be conducted by either the high commissioner or through the CRO, rather than by any other offices of the British government.³⁶

Throughout the following decade, the British tried to adopt the same tactic of throwing their lot in early with the man whom they believed would best secure their strategic and economic interests. As with the case of the Philippines, the transfer of sovereignty in Ceylon and elsewhere dovetailed with the Americans' encouragement of their European allies to elect pro-Western Asian elites in the hope of maintaining political, commercial, and military influence. The 'model' post-colony status of Ceylon was also an expression of British pride at achieving all that they had set out to do within the limits imposed by decolonization.

³⁴ 'Do hon. Members think that there is anything in this Defence Agreement with England that is going to stand in the way of complete freedom? It has been said that we have had nothing in these Agreements that is in the interest of our country. I just do not think so, Mr. Speaker.' See 'Defence agreement with Britain (statement of S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, minister of health and local government, in the House of Representatives)', in Jayawardane, *Documents on Sri Lanka's foreign policy*, pp. 85–7.

³⁵ Wickramasinghe notes the imperial flavour of the independence celebrations in 1948. *Sri Lanka in the modern age*, pp. 157–61.

³⁶ Patrick Gordon Walker, 'Ceylon', 17 Mar. 1948, CAB 129/26/1, NA.

The first three leaders of independent Ceylon all hailed from the same politically conservative, rural landowning background; indeed, they were from the same family. While their policies were not alike, they were framed by a common approach to the position which they believed Ceylon was in at the start of its independence. Both from an institutional as well as from a political point of view, D. S. Senanayake was responsible for establishing his nation's political outlook during these years.

He was essentially pro-British and pro-Commonwealth, and to that extent also quite sceptical about the United Nations, an organization which he declared in 1951 'has now become an arena for power manoeuvres'. Commentators have tended to overplay the idea of Senanayake as a 'loyal servant' of the British crown, however; his negotiations with the British as well as his speeches of the time indicate a man who was more self-aware and independent-minded than that. His 'middle way' approach should be distinguished from the more Nehruvian non-alignment stances of his successors. Senanayake's idea, or instinct, was for the unity of like-minded nations. To an audience of British listeners in 1951, he stated: 'We believe in a way of life which I may be permitted to call the middle way and in which the rule of moral law founded on a firm faith in the "one-ness" of human life would hold sway.'³⁷ To the Ceylon parliament, he declared that 'it is not only with the Commonwealth, not only with India and Pakistan, but also with other countries – maybe with America – that like the democratic way of living that we have established the closest friendship'.³⁸ Under Senanayake's stewardship, Ceylon also entered into the Colombo Plan, which originated at a Commonwealth foreign ministers' meeting in Colombo in 1950 and was a means of tying the economic development of South and South-East Asia to support for the Western powers in the Cold War.³⁹

Don Stephen's successor, his son Dudley, was largely content to follow in his father's footsteps in defence matters. Although his own upbringing was rather different and he was on occasion liable publicly to oppose the elder Senanayake's ideas, Ceylon essentially remained on the same course under his brief first spell as prime minister. Indeed, during this time, he even asked the British government for military help to quell a communist-inspired uprising on the island.⁴⁰ Dudley Senanayake's election victory in 1952 had also raised British hopes that the defence agreements so ambiguously framed in 1947 might finally be formalized. The UK government had wanted 'to obtain from the Ceylon Government some written security of tenure in our installations', but negotiations carried out since early 1949 had not progressed 'owing to the devious tactics of the Ceylon government' (wrote the marquess of

³⁷ *The Listener*, 18 Jan. 1951.

³⁸ Hulugalle, *Senanayake*, p. 204.

³⁹ For the British, the Colombo plan was also a means of 'fostering the commonwealth connection'. See 'Colombo plan', note by the secretary of state for foreign affairs and other ministers, 20 Dec. 1951, CAB 129/48/51, NA.

⁴⁰ Cabinet secretary, 'Notebook', 18 Aug. 1953, CAB 195/11/56, NA.

Salisbury, secretary of state for Commonwealth relations). The UNP's success in 1952 gave Dudley the overall majority that his father never had, and 'He should, therefore, be better placed to resist, if he wishes to, the political pressures of which his father appeared to be nervous.' The British were unsure of how to proceed, however: on the one hand, there appeared to be implicit trust in the UNP in carrying out the elder Senanayake's promises, whether written or not. On the other hand, Salisbury asks whether it might not be necessary 'to take some new initiative in an attempt to secure a firm agreement about our tenure of the bases'. This self-questioning betrays the fundamental instability of the British military position in post-independence Ceylon. Ultimately, the initiative was not taken: 'In the final analysis we shall in any case be at the mercy of whatever Ceylon government is in power; and any alternative government would, it seems, be so strongly opposed to the Commonwealth connexion that it would tear up any agreement made with us.'⁴¹

As long as the UNP was in charge, however, it seemed that all would be as it was at independence. This also suited the foreign policy of Conservative governments of the mid-1950s, which was essentially pragmatic in the way of its Labour predecessor. Both were built on the search for 'influence', which they thought they were suited to projecting and also fitted the coming political era.⁴² What they underestimated was the strength of the foundations necessary to act out these attitudes successfully internationally. In December 1953, Viscount Swinton, who followed Salisbury as Commonwealth relations secretary, reported in a record of a conversation with the Ceylon minister of finance, Oliver Ernest Goonetilleke, that the Ceylon government would remain sympathetic to British business and that the British navy and air force 'should remain here for ever' owing to Ceylon's vulnerability to both the Russians and the possible scenario of communist rule in south India. Perhaps politicking, Goonetilleke had sought assurances that the British would not reduce their visible strength in Trincomalee, since rumours that they might do so 'had created a very bad impression in Ceylon'. Indeed, 'it would be a help if, whenever possible, British ships should show up at Trincomalee'.⁴³

Goonetilleke was finance minister in the government of John Kotelawala, who took over from his cousin-by-marriage, Dudley Senanayake, after the latter's resignation in 1953. Contemporaries viewed Kotelawala as a transitional figure between the more straightforwardly pro-Western Senanayakes and the neutralism of the Bandaranaiques.⁴⁴ Educated, like Dudley, at Cambridge, Kotelawala also spoke of a 'middle path' in international relations, but he framed this

⁴¹ Secretary of state for Commonwealth relations, 'United Kingdom defence installations in Ceylon', 25 July 1952, CAB/129/54/37, NA.

⁴² Darwin, *Empire project*, pp. 569–70.

⁴³ Viscount Swinton, 'Relations with Ceylon', 8 Dec. 1953, CAB 129/64/44, NA.

⁴⁴ K. Qureshi, 'Ceylon in world affairs', *Pakistan Horizon*, 14 (1964), pp. 355–67. See also Kumarasingham, *Political legacy*, pp. 156–7, on the British preference for Dudley Senanayake over Kotelawala after Don Stephen Senanayake's death.

more robustly than D. S. Senanayake did: 'Ceylon, together with several other South Asian countries, has already declared itself unequivocally against alignment with either of the existing power groups, and has, instead, pursued a policy of friendship towards all nations alike.'⁴⁵ He also opposed a British collective defence proposal for South-East Asia, but at Bandung in 1955 he drew attention to the similarity between Soviet colonialism and Western imperialism.⁴⁶ More than Bandaranaike, Kotelawala was perhaps the epitome of the pragmatic post-colonial leader. In a speech in Canada, he praised the smoothness of the transition from the 'old' to the 'new' Commonwealth but pointed out that 'our association with the Commonwealth has come about in rather different circumstances [to yours], and, to this extent, we have a different approach to it'. D. S. Senanayake's idealist international vision had no place here: 'It is by the eradication of this ever-present fear of want and famine that the Eastern world can be preserved from falling prey to the temptations of Marxist communism.'⁴⁷

All three of the UNP leaders in power between 1948 and 1956, although avowedly anti-communist, took a pragmatic attitude towards the development of the national economy, the younger Senanayake even concluding a rubber-rice deal with China (against American wishes) in 1952. Yet none of them attempted to reformulate the terms on which Ceylon continued to relate to its former colonial master. Indeed, in 1955, when Kotelawala was confronted by a communist MP in parliament over the issue of British bases, he replied that without the bases 'we will be like the Maldive Islands, we will not be recognized'.⁴⁸ A combination of political and cultural sympathy with Britain and practical caution in the face of shifts and realignments elsewhere ensured that they never strayed too far from the terms as well as the mood of the 1947 agreement.

It could be argued that, despite his election victory over the UNP in 1956, Bandaranaike was politically inclined in much the same way as his predecessors. Despite coming from similar socially conservative roots, in 1936, Bandaranaike founded the culturally exclusivist Sinhala Maha Saba and became by turns an ally and then a political rival of the UNP until his newly founded Sri Lanka Freedom party (SLFP) stormed to power in an unlikely coalition with leftists and the Buddhist right. According to his biographer, Bandaranaike fitted

⁴⁵ Sir John Lionel Kotelawala, *Between two worlds: the collected speeches of the right honourable Sir John Kotelawala* (Colombo, 1954), pp. 47–8.

⁴⁶ 'South East Asia defence: message from Ceylonese prime minister to UK foreign secretary saying that Ceylon is against the collective defence proposals', 1954, FO 371/111876/1074/317, NA; Sir John Lionel Kotelawala, *Bandung 1955: addresses to the Asian-African conference and statements to the press by the Rt. Hon. Sir John Kotelawala* (Colombo, 1955), pp. 18–19. In 1954, Kotelawala also inaugurated the important pre-Bandung association of 'Colombo powers': India, Pakistan, Ceylon, Burma, and Indonesia.

⁴⁷ Kotelawala, *Between two worlds*, pp. 23–6.

⁴⁸ Avtar Singh Bhasin, *India–Sri Lanka relations and Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict document – 1947–2000*, 1 (New Delhi, 2001), p. 12.

uneasily into the mould of an anti-colonial nationalist. While the role suited his rejection of his father's position 'as a pillar of the British regime', it also complicated relations with other leading Ceylonese nationalists during the late colonial period. Although he was only ever a 'selective' borrower of Gandhian ideas and methods, during his long years as a campaigning politician he went further than any of his prominent Ceylonese peers in this respect: another indication of his detachment from the mainstream, British-oriented politics of other elite Ceylonese.⁴⁹

Bandaranaike's relationship with D. S. Senanayake is fascinating for the light it shines on British calculations at independence. The two men were united, uneasily, by a set of fundamentally anti-colonial (although not exactly anti-British), development-themed goals, as well as an idea of how political power should be organized in Ceylon. However, Bandaranaike's qualified respect for Senanayake was not mirrored by the older man, who was more liable to think of Bandaranaike as a politically intelligent but dangerously populist ally. The British, similarly, did not trust Bandaranaike as a partner and seem to have made a decision to keep him away from power in 1948.⁵⁰ In 1951, explaining his decision to cross the floor in opposition to the UNP, Bandaranaike told his newly formed SLFP that Ceylon's independence, unlike those of India, Pakistan, and Burma, was not the outcome of a mass movement with 'clear-cut principles and priorities' but was instead the product of a constitutional tie-up between Senanayake and his advisers, which included the Britons Lord Soulbury and Ivor Jennings. The Ceylonese masses consequently looked on their freedom as one which was 'to a great extent the private property of these individuals', an attitude that was responsible both for the corruption that was now rife in Ceylon and 'for the reluctance to deal effectively with the many important problems that face us, a free country today, particularly in the context of the present trend of world affairs'. If the British had not earlier been sure where a Ceylon led by Bandaranaike might lead them, the message seemed clearer now.⁵¹

Bandaranaike's relationship with Nehru also reveals something of the British attitude towards South Asia by the mid-1950s. Nehru was on as good terms with Bandaranaike as he was with any Ceylonese leader. Bandaranaike, like other Ceylonese, admired Nehru as a statesman of international renown, and Nehru for his part described Bandaranaike (to Chou En-lai) as 'a typical Oxford University product', 'a good man', and 'an old friend of mine'.⁵² On

⁴⁹ James Manor, *The expedient utopian: Bandaranaike and Ceylon* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 3, 95, 103. Farmer argues that his nationalism was against 'residuary imperialism': B. H. Farmer, 'The social basis of nationalism in Ceylon', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 24 (1965), pp. 431–9.

⁵⁰ Manor, *Expedient utopian*, pp. 143–4, 174.

⁵¹ 'Speech at the inauguration of the Sri Lanka freedom party on 2nd September, 1951', retrieved from www.swrdbandaranaike.lk/speeches_writings_slfp.html on 16 Feb, 2015.

⁵² Bhasin, *India–Sri Lanka relations*, pp. 15–16, 19; S. Gopal, gen. ed., *Selected works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, second series, xxxvi (New Delhi, 2005), p. 8.

international issues they were like-minded; Nehru's leadership over Suez led Asian opinion on the matter and his well-known stance of non-alignment was a model for Bandaranaike's own 'dynamic neutralism'.⁵³ In an address to the Commonwealth Press Association in London in July 1956 Bandaranaike explained that in the interests of peace he did not wish to align himself with either of the 'military blocs', and that by remaining on friendly terms with both Ceylon would 'try perhaps to provide a bridge between the two radically opposed points of view'.⁵⁴ The words could have come from Nehru; the British also noted the resemblance. On a visit to Ceylon in January 1958, Harold Macmillan observed that Bandaranaike 'is [a] sort of local Nehru' and 'clearly models himself on Mr. N'.⁵⁵

Because of pre-election agreements he had made with the left parties, Bandaranaike's coming to power marked an unmistakable Ceylonese turn to the left, at least as far as Britain was concerned. Bandaranaike had already shown signs of his independence in criticizing Kotelawala's speech denouncing communism at the Bandung conference in 1955. As prime minister, he then led Ceylon to become one of the few recipients of Chinese aid after signing a pact with them in 1957. By 1958, much to Anglo-American chagrin, he was on cordial terms with the USSR and China as well as several east European states. All of these moves served to amplify the timing of the 'rundown' to the transfer of British bases during the autumn of 1957.⁵⁶

Bandaranaike's early statements as prime minister of Ceylon had clearly indicated the coming change in policy. To a press briefing in June 1956, he had declared he had not been able to find 'even one scrap of paper' giving the British the right to have bases in Ceylon. He had understood the defence agreement to have been a pact for mutual defence only, and suspected the previous UNP administration of underhanded dealing.⁵⁷ His pronouncements on neutralism, accompanied by his strong opposition, both to the use of Ceylon's bases in Britain's conflict with Egypt and indeed throughout the Suez crisis, might be seen as a necessary return for communist support in the election victory, yet there were also sound economic motives behind them in Ceylon's desire to diversify trade beyond the few, mainly Western, partners with whom it had operated up until that point.⁵⁸

⁵³ Sarvepalli Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru: a biography*, II: 1947–1956 (Delhi, 1979), pp. 272–90.

⁵⁴ Jayawardane, *Documents on Sri Lanka's foreign policy*, p. 6. See also *Times*, 25 June 1956, p. 8, in which Bandaranaike tells British reporters on a visit to London that 'Our desire not to have bases stems from our basic foreign policy, indeed accepted by the previous government, that we should keep clear of power blocks.'

⁵⁵ Harold Macmillan, *Riding the storm, 1956–1959* (New York, NY, 1971), p. 395. See also Alec Douglas Home, Walter Monckton, 'Ceylon', 1 May 1956, CAB 129/81/7, NA.

⁵⁶ C. Sumanapala, 'Foreign policy of SWRD Bandaranaike', *Nation*, 5 Jan. 2014. The agreement with the Chinese came into force on 1 Jan. 1958. See also De Silva, 'Sri Lanka', p. 365.

⁵⁷ *Times*, 14 June 1956, p. 9.

⁵⁸ 'Inconsistent with our neutral policy', *Times*, 5 Dec. 1956, p. 8; S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, 'A record of achievement (address to annual session of S. L. F. P. in 1958)', retrieved from www.

The official British response to the administratively inexperienced and politically heterogeneous new Ceylonese government elected in April 1956 was generally cautious. On the issue of defence, the naval base at Trincomalee was assessed at this time as 'very expensive to maintain and the admiralty are considering whether we could without undue difficulty give up some of the facilities we at present enjoy'. However, the Negombo airfield 'is needed under our present and future plans for transport to the Far East as a supplement to the limited facilities we enjoy in India; we must seek to maintain a staging post in Ceylon'. Furthermore, 'the communication facilities are also important to us and must be preserved, but the means of doing so need further examination'. Bandaranaike was judged as 'neither hostile nor unreasonable' and presumably preferable to the 'vain, ambitious self-advertiser Kotelawala' and his 'corrupt and autocratic regime'. While there was hope that Bandaranaike might steer a more moderate course as leader than he indicated whilst in opposition, it was also recognized that the overwhelming vote for the new government could be interpreted as an assertion of Ceylonese nationalism and, insofar as that was 'against co-operation with the west and "big business", our interests may suffer'.⁵⁹ In early July 1956, during the Commonwealth prime ministers' meeting in London, it was reported in *The Times* that the British had managed to secure an agreement with Ceylon whereby certain resources and facilities were allowed to continue for a time in exchange for helping in the build-up and training of Ceylon's still embryonic armed forces.⁶⁰ A closer look at the progress of the new agreement reveals a dramatic change in British outlook.

Produced by Home and Monckton and dated 4 July 1956, the memorandum 'British bases in Ceylon' is a remarkable document in the evolution of the British relationship with Ceylon, which also helps us to see how ambiguous were the foundations on which rested the post-Raj decolonizing project.⁶¹ Reporting on discussions with Bandaranaike during the Commonwealth prime ministers' conference, it confirms that the general terms of the 1947 defence agreement were built on the trust between the British government and D. S. Senanayake. As a consequence, residual British power had been resting on Ceylonese 'goodwill', albeit to mutual benefit. With Bandaranaike's ascension, new elements were brought into play in Ceylonese government, specifically elements of the left as well as hard-line Ceylonese religious nationalism, which did not share in this feeling of goodwill towards the British. While Bandaranaike did not wish to abrogate the 1947 agreement and indeed still requested

swrdbandaranaike.lk/speeches_writings_slfp.html on 16 Feb. 2015. 'Use of military bases against Egypt: request by Ceylonese prime minister for written assurance that UK will not use bases in Ceylon', 1956, FO 371/119153/14211/2082, NA.

⁵⁹ Alec Douglas Home, Walter Monckton, 'Ceylon', 1 May 1956, CAB 129/81/7, NA.

⁶⁰ *Times*, 12 July 1956.

⁶¹ 'British bases in Ceylon', 4 July 1956, CAB 129/82/18, NA. See also Darwin, *Empire project*, pp. 541–2.

British 'support and assistance in developing and expanding the armed forces of Ceylon', he made it clear that he would retain his election pledge 'that British "bases" should cease to exist in Ceylon'. The key for Bandaranaike was to satisfy political opinion in Ceylon by presenting in public, as a Ceylonese sovereign action, what had been mutually agreed with the British in private. Given the ongoing British anxiety over the wording of this agreement, what is revealing is the extent to which they were forced to climb down even from the minimum level that they had previously deemed sufficient:

The United Kingdom no longer needs to retain all the defence installations which it now holds in Ceylon. In particular, we wish to make substantial reductions in the naval base at Trincomalee. Nor do we consider it necessary to retain as an RAF station the airfield at Katunayake [Negombo], so long as we continue to enjoy over-flying rights and staging facilities.

The decisions were confirmed in cabinet discussions recorded on the following day.⁶² After discussions with Bandaranaike, the British deemed their need for defence installations in Ceylon as 'now less than it had been'. The only 'essential' remaining establishments were 'service wireless stations and certain other communications installations in Ceylon'. K. M. De Silva claims that in losing the bases in 1957, Britain was 'glad to be rid of a potential irritant in the relation between the two countries', but the record of cabinet meetings during this time tells a story of British re-adjustment.⁶³

The Trincomalee base was duly handed over on 15 October 1957 and Katunayake air station was transferred on 1 November. In his public statements on the matter, Bandaranaike repeatedly emphasized two points: the desire to end what he described as the 'last remnants of colonialism' on the island, and the importance of carrying out the transfer 'in a friendly way'. Perhaps it reflected the political compromises he had had to make to achieve power; it might also have reflected his Janus-faced political personality; ultimately, though, it demonstrated his shrewd handling of a politically sensitive issue. At a time shortly after the Suez crisis, when his British friends trod wearily for fear of being branded as colonialists, he was able to proclaim: 'Ceylon's independence is complete today.'⁶⁴

Almost at a single stroke, Bandaranaike changed the political and diplomatic relationship between Ceylon and Britain. As far as the British were concerned, the loss of the bases was a grievous blow, rendering naval transport across the Indian Ocean more difficult and costly and posing serious refuelling problems for British aircraft making the journey between the Middle East and the Far East. The new political regime in Ceylon confirmed the Ministry of Defence's

⁶² Cabinet Conclusions, 5 July 1956, CAB 128/30/271, NA. Some of these ideas may also have been influenced by First Sea Lord Mountbatten's views on rationalizing British naval defence in the wake of the sequence of defence cuts during the late 1950s.

⁶³ De Silva, *History of Sri Lanka*, p. 636.

⁶⁴ Sumanapala, 'Foreign policy'.

fears that over-flight rights would be threatened, at a time when they were growing increasingly dependent on a strategy of air mobility that required secure staging posts.⁶⁵ The loss of Trincomalee was followed soon after by a change in the Indian Ocean command structure as the East Indies Command was abolished and its responsibilities divided between the Far East, south Atlantic, and South American command, and the commander of the new Arabian Seas and Persian Gulf station.⁶⁶ In addition to the loss of military facilities, the British also had seen in Ceylon the creation of trading and aid agreements with China, growing cultural and economic ties with the Soviet Union, and the legal and administrative diminution of English to the benefit of the Sinhala and Tamil languages.

Ceylon's independence had arrived in 1948 at the high point of British hopes for a regenerated Empire-Commonwealth. In 1948, Gordon Walker was able to report to Clement Attlee's government that 'The friendship of Ceylon for Britain, which was always strong, became stronger after 4th February.' Two years later, D. S. Senanayake spoke of how the independence of the South Asian nations had granted the Commonwealth 'a new influence in Asia'.⁶⁷ The events of 1956–9 indicated that a second, more protracted decolonization was underway and announced further erosion of the ties between the two nations. In 1958, in response to criticisms from Gordon Walker about the politics of his government, Bandaranaike remarked that

I cannot refrain from deploring the tendency of certain British politicians to express patronising views on the politics and politicians of some of our countries. They apparently cannot forget that we were at one time their colonies and think that this gives them a right to patronise us in this way. I think it would be in the interests of the friendly relations between Britain and some of our countries if British politicians restrained themselves from indulging in this type of action.⁶⁸

It now seemed that the leaders of Britain and Ceylon understood each other much less well than before.

The years leading up to Bandaranaike's premiership might be seen as a classic example of the 'imperialism of decolonization' theory of understanding the end of the British empire. The continuity of a British military presence in Ceylon mirrored arrangements that were made with other areas of the Indian Ocean, such as at Simonstown in South Africa and at Singapore.⁶⁹ Indeed, the 1955 Simonstown agreement demonstrates the extent to which the new

⁶⁵ David French, 'Duncan Sandys and the projection of British power after Suez', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 24 (2013), pp. 47, 48.

⁶⁶ Darby, *British defence policy*, p. 128. See also the editorial 'Ceylon on the move' in *Times*, 11 Apr. 1956.

⁶⁷ *Times*, 10 Jan. 1950, p. 4.

⁶⁸ Bandaranaike, 'A record of achievement'.

⁶⁹ See P. J. Henshaw, 'The transfer of Simonstown: Afrikaner nationalism, South African strategic dependence, and British global power', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 20 (1992), pp. 419–44.

conservative thinking after the war could override other political factors, such as growing Commonwealth opposition to apartheid.⁷⁰ In Singapore, which gained self-government and then independence more than a decade after Ceylon, the British had been prepared to use force to retain their bases. The impending loss of Katunayake and Trincomalee led the British to turn to Gan in the Maldives to continue their air communications in South-East Asia.⁷¹ As the colonial dominoes fell, Britain was finding different ways to achieve its military and strategic needs around the Indian Ocean, helping to meet the premise ‘not that Britain should sustain the Empire but that the Empire, in a new form, should continue to sustain Britain’.⁷² However, another interpretation of the loss of bases in 1957 is that Ceylon had stepped out of Britain’s protection just at the point that it sensed it would no longer suffice for its needs.⁷³ In order to try to make sense of such paradoxes, historians have sometimes linked Britain’s progress away from empire with that of larger entities such as the United States or Europe.⁷⁴ In any case, if the goal of granting independence to Ceylon, as it was in Africa after 1957, was ‘to exchange colonial control for informal empire’, and if, unlike Africa, Ceylon was judged to have been in a politically and economically sound position for such a transition to be effective and beneficial, then the inevitable question that arises is: how did the British manage to drop the ball? The best response from the foregoing is to suggest that it might never have been securely in their hands at all. British responses to events in Ceylon in the period after Bandaranaike’s premiership show how the grip continued to loosen.

II

At the start of the 1960s, South Asia was still of considerable strategic and economic interest to Britain and there is evidence that Britain sought to extend its military presence in and around the Indian Ocean. Including Malaya, South Asia contributed almost half of Britain’s dollar earnings and a quarter of Britain’s exports went to countries bordering the Indian Ocean and adjoining areas of the Pacific. Britain’s military leadership had early in the decade also identified Africa and Asia, not Europe, as the main theatre of future conflicts. The British were especially concerned that the communists would seek to exploit any trouble created by the rise of nationalism, so that policing and counter-insurgency were identified as Britain’s major defence priority in the coming years.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Hopkins, ‘Rethinking decolonization’, p. 227.

⁷¹ *Times*, 4 Jan. 1957.

⁷² Louis, ‘Dissolution of the British empire’, p. 330.

⁷³ This is the argument of De Silva, ‘Sri Lanka’, pp. 364–5.

⁷⁴ See for example D. Reynolds, *Britannia overruled: British policy and world power in the twentieth century* (Edinburgh, 2000), pp. 29–30.

⁷⁵ The new British thinking is outlined in Macmillan’s ‘Future policy study, 1960–1970’, 29 Feb. 1960, CAB 129/100/35, NA. See also Singh, *Limits of British influence*, p. 196; Reynolds, *Britannia overruled*, p. 212; Darby, *British defence policy*, p. 218.

To gain a better sense of Britain's changing priorities with respect to Ceylon, as well as their limits, this section will make use of diplomatic documents mostly exchanged between the British High Commission in Colombo and the CRO in London. Between 1957 and 1962, the British high commissioner in Ceylon was Alexander Morley, although his deputy Timothy Crosthwait (1957–61) acted on his behalf during the handover of bases. The key figure at the CRO was Alexander Clutterbuck, permanent under-secretary from 1959 to 1961 and a man who had personal experience in Ceylon as secretary to the Donoughmore Commission on constitutional reform in 1927–8. Major policy decisions in this area were, of course, the prerogative of the prime minister, Harold Macmillan, in consultation with his cabinet. Historians have noted the diversity of views that were expressed (and also often not expressed) within the CRO and the apparatus of foreign diplomacy in Britain. A career civil service that was not susceptible to the 'ebb and flow' of elections was also, as most notably with the Suez affair, liable to be ignored altogether by the prime minister when occasion demanded it. Still, there is evidence in the history of both the formal and informal British empire of the 'man on the spot' playing an important mediatory role between the powers in Whitehall and the situation on the periphery. The late 1950s and early 1960s may have been years of high political influence for Commonwealth high commissioners, who were operating 'within a very supportive political context'.⁷⁶ Indeed, the concept of 'foreign policy' can be overstated, and the response to events that was indicated by the term largely depended on the information arriving from diplomatic outposts.⁷⁷ The pronouncements that were received and passed through the CRO, whether they reached and were heeded by the foreign secretary or not, provide a useful insight into the official mind, what was considered to be of importance, and what, though it might be considered important, was ultimately ignored by the decision-makers.⁷⁸

By the end of the 1950s and in the aftermath of Suez, the reconfiguration of British defence policy under the Macmillan government could be summed up by a closer linkage with the Americans and a turn towards nuclearization. In the retreat from Suez, the British also placed less emphasis on the Indian Ocean as a focus of their security concerns, and paradoxically this might have helped soften the blow of losing the Ceylon bases. Despite the shake-up of the Bandaranaike years and the clear preference for UNP government within British diplomatic circles, relations with the SLFP administration as a result of their victory in

⁷⁶ Lorna Lloyd, *Diplomacy with a difference: the Commonwealth Office of High Commissioner, 1880–2006* (Leiden, 2007), pp. 191–2, 202.

⁷⁷ Cabinet Conclusion, 4 June 1958, CAB 128/32/46, NA, indicates, for example, the degree of British distance from the Ceylon ethnic political question.

⁷⁸ Z. Steiner, 'The Foreign and Commonwealth Office: resistance and adaptation to changing times', *Contemporary British History*, 18 (2004), pp. 13–30; R. Hyam, 'The primacy of geopolitics: the dynamics of British imperial policy, 1763–1963', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 27 (1999), pp. 27–52; Reynolds, *Britannia overruled*, pp. 37–47.

the July 1960 elections were cordial. The British appeared to have adjusted themselves to the UNP/SLFP rivalry that now lay at the heart of Ceylonese politics.

After the interregnum between Bandaranaike's assassination by a Buddhist monk in 1959 and his widow's coming to power in the following year, the minister of state for Commonwealth relations, Cuthbert Alport, invited to his office in London Felix Dias Bandaranaike, the finance minister, who was a nephew of the prime minister and was understood to be the prime mover in the new government. Bandaranaike emerged with credit from their conversation touching on the Congo crisis, the Common Market, and British commercial interests in Ceylon, Alport describing him as 'the most promising product of Ceylon politics that I have met so far'.⁷⁹ Macmillan had met him on the following day, 23 September and – a sign of the confidence between the two men as well as of the recognition of his prominence – Felix had asked if Sirimavo Bandaranaike should accompany the British prime minister to the upcoming United Nations general assembly in New York. Although appreciating the value of having 'the biggest possible Commonwealth representation at the meeting' Macmillan ultimately decided it was better not 'to press her further in the face of her preoccupations in Ceylon'.⁸⁰

If British motives for maintaining good relations with Ceylon were primarily strategic and couched in terms of Commonwealth influence on the world stage, then there were also other sound reasons for continued co-operation. For one, Ceylon benefited from substantial British aid in the form of technical assistance and support, with further grants and loans projected through to the later 1960s.⁸¹ Ceylon also counted on Britain to help plug one of the biggest holes in its educational infrastructure, technical and vocational training.⁸² As one commentator noted in 1960, Britain was Ceylon's major trading partner and trade relations between the two nations was cemented by the strength of London banking.⁸³ In military terms, too, there appeared to have been a renewed accommodation. In February 1960, it was in Colombo that the British and the Maldivians signed the agreement to establish RAF bases on Gan Island.⁸⁴

British companies and businesspeople in Ceylon, many of whom had remained on the island after independence and led the export trade, expected to continue their stay and for the British government to continue to play a role

⁷⁹ Note of a conversation between the minister of state, CRO, the Rt Hon. C. J. M. Alport, TD, MP, and the Ceylon finance minister, Mr Dias Bandaranaike, on Thursday, 22 Sept. 1960, PREM 11/2915, NA.

⁸⁰ Note for the record, PREM 11/2915, NA.

⁸¹ See Hansard HC Deb, 24 June 1960, vol. 625 c76W, and HC Deb, 27 July 1961, vol. 645 cc78–81W.

⁸² See *Times of Ceylon*, 21 Mar. 1961.

⁸³ Wriggins, *Ceylon*, pp. 380–2.

⁸⁴ Hansard HC Deb, 4 Feb. 1960, vol. 616 cc1199–201.

in their preservation.⁸⁵ A case in point is found in the letter sent by W. W. Wood of George Steuart & Co. to his friend the British MP Hamilton Kerr in April 1960.⁸⁶ George Steuart & Co. was a British trading company, established in Ceylon since 1835, that had long exported tea and coffee. At the time of Wood's letter, it was managing the biggest tea plantations in Ceylon.⁸⁷ The nationalization programmes that Mrs Bandaranaike's SLFP government would introduce if they were (as happened) elected in the July 1960 elections threatened to damage these British interests; in fact the 1961 nationalization of oil and the deal struck with the Soviet Union involved the closing of British and US companies and led to the American withdrawal of economic and technical assistance to Ceylon.⁸⁸ Wood, however, presented the immediate danger in terms of the growing ethno-political tensions surrounding the upcoming elections, warning Kerr that 'a situation is being created that might well result again in a clash between the Sinhalese and the Ceylon Tamils'.⁸⁹ Recognizing the predominance of the Tamil Federal party among representatives of the northern Jaffna Tamils in the Colombo parliament, he noted that the likely failure of Dudley Senanayake's UNP government to gain power, if it were laid at the hands of Federal party intransigence, might lead to Tamils being 'attacked, even physically'. Given that many of the tea plantation workers would have been Tamil speakers, albeit from a south Indian background that was outside the Federal party's main constituency, such a development would undoubtedly harm business. Wood disapproved of the 'Communist elements' in the SLFP's election coalition and applauded Senanayake's decision not to opt for such a power-sharing gamble. But the politically moderate Federal party Tamils' refusal to 'freely' give the UNP their support follows from 'misguided' notions: 'The burning question, as I expect you know, concerns the use of Tamil as one of the official languages and that could undoubtedly be resolved given a little bit of give and take.' The basis of Wood's belief that an

⁸⁵ Ashton, 'Ceylon', p. 454. Strikingly, at independence, British business continued to be represented in the Ceylon parliament. Kumarasingham, *Political legacy*, p. 128. See also the praise of the chairman of the Anglo-Ceylon and General Estates Company for D.S. Senanayake's administration in his annual meeting in 1949 in the *Times*, 7 Oct. 1949, p. 9. Macmillan had earlier 'begged' Solomon Bandaranaike to leave alone the British-owned rubber and tea estates in any nationalization schemes. Macmillan, *Riding the storm*, p. 395.

⁸⁶ Note from Sir Hamilton Kerr, Bart., MP to Rt Hon. the earl of Home, CRO, 11 Apr. 1960, DO 35/8906, NA. See also the enclosure: letter from W. W. Wood, George Steuart & Co., Ltd, Ceylon PO Box 151, Colombo, 1 Apr. 1960, to Sir Hamilton Kerr, MP, and the follow-up letter from Secretary of State Home to Sir Hamilton Kerr, 14 Apr. 1960. That Wood should contact Kerr instead of the high commissioner in Colombo might also have had something to do with the perceived incapacity for business of the British diplomatic corps at the time. See Steiner, 'Foreign and Commonwealth Office', p. 26.

⁸⁷ Ian Gardner, 'My experiences in tea and rubber plantation management in Ceylon', retrieved from www.scribd.com on 12 July 2014.

⁸⁸ Qureshi, 'Ceylon in world affairs', p. 358.

⁸⁹ The reference is to the riots of 1956 and 1958, in which hundreds of people, mainly Tamils, were killed.

accommodation could be reached between the UNP and the Federal party is that the Ceylon Tamils 'represent the most industrious community in the island and from the financial success angle have done more for Ceylon than nearly all other communities put together, over the years (apart, of course, from the British)'.

Kerr asked Lord Home on Wood's behalf whether it might be possible for the high commissioner in Colombo to 'have a word' with the Federal party leaders so as 'to point out the dangers' in their refusal to declare support for Senanayake. Wood had recognized that the British government 'cannot and indeed, for obvious reasons, does not interfere with the internal affairs of members of the Commonwealth' but wondered whether the foreign secretary 'had not some means of dropping a hint to the Tamil leaders of the possible dangers in the position that they appear to have taken up'. His own suggestion was that 'the Commonwealth relations office in London might have contact with a Tamil gentleman of suitable standing whom they could warn'. All three of the men involved in this discussion are cautious yet concerned to intervene, Wood adding that although this 'is not a matter that can in any way be ventilated in open Parliament in London' it was one of 'quite considerable urgency'. Lord Home, while expressing his reluctance to interfere in Ceylon's affairs, nevertheless assured Kerr that he was 'taking every opportunity to urge on Mr. Senanayake the need to extend the hand of friendship to the Tamils and to try to meet them half way'. The correspondence reflects the dimensions of British interest and action regarding Ceylonese ethno-politics. The notion of domestic 'conflict' could, and often was, used by the British and other powers to justify intrusion into another nation's sovereignty. Yet the nature of independent Ceylon's political development posed unique problems for the substantial British presence on the island. For one, the possibility of language reform would affect the British almost as much as it affected the middle-class Tamils who relied on their knowledge of the English language to secure white-collar employment in competition with a Sinhala-speaking majority. After the SLFP came to power in the July elections, with Federal party support, a central issue was the speed and extent to which English would be replaced by Sinhala and Tamil as the language of administration across the different provinces of the country. British officials in Colombo and London hurriedly exchanged messages to try to clarify the situation. It was natural that the proposed changes would create concern at this level, since it would directly affect their work as information-gatherers and effective communicators.⁹⁰

Another unheralded connection between the British and the Tamils at this time was the desirability of federalism. For the British, as for other European empires on the cusp of dissolution, federalism often proved a viable means of retaining control at the centre as sub-national groupings emerged with the

⁹⁰ Confidential letter from K. F. X. Burns, Office of High Commissioner, Colombo, to A. I. M. Davie, London, 23 Dec. 1960, and front matter – 17 Jan 1961, DO 196/96, NA.

introduction of elections. Politically desirable since it broke up dangerous local alliances while preserving overall British power, federations were also mooted as being a more efficient way of defending territories. In circumstances such as India in the 1930s, where independence was expected sooner rather than later, a federal interlude offered the British the possibility of leaving 'with dignity' while retaining 'economic and defence connections'.⁹¹ What of the post-colonial federation? The 'federalism' demanded by the Tamils, which had gathered momentum after S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's ascension to power, could be accommodated to British ideas of the same, and the strategic and economic advantages of political intervention were clear.⁹² Yet it is unrealistic to imagine British intervention in Ceylon sometime during the late 1950s or early 1960s, despite some attention in the press.⁹³ Over-riding any such intervention would have been the post-Suez de-prioritization of operations independent of the United States, and the directive that 'no forces should be allocated to preserving order in or protecting foreign countries'.⁹⁴

It is clear from the diplomatic record that the British were especially interested in the possibility of Indian involvement in the Tamil civil disobedience campaign conducted in northern and eastern Ceylon during early 1961. In a confidential letter dated 9 March 1961 from Alexander Morley to Duncan Sandys, the secretary of state for Commonwealth relations, Morley noted the possibility of 'a very considerable political force' developing should the two main Tamil political groupings in south India engage 'in active cooperation' with the Federal party and the Tamils in Ceylon.⁹⁵ An Indian Tamil alliance with the agitators in Ceylon was not the only kind of Indian involvement that concerned British officials: there were also the so-called 'estate Tamils', descendants of south Indian migrants brought into Ceylon by the British in the later nineteenth century to work on the tea plantations of the central uplands. At one point during the agitation, a British official at the High Commission observed the possibility that the estate Tamils' main political organ, the Ceylon Workers' Congress, could throw in its lot with the Ceylon Tamils, creating 'a serious situation'.⁹⁶ As instanced by the earlier Wood correspondence, the threat of violence in tea-growing areas could result in long-term economic disruption as well as endanger British lives and property.⁹⁷

⁹¹ Louis, 'Dissolution of the British empire', p. 349.

⁹² See the Federal party's resolutions at their annual convention in 1956 in *Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi Silver Jubilee volume* (London, 2000), pp. 297–8.

⁹³ See 'Editorial', *Times*, 10 Jan. 1961.

⁹⁴ S.J. Ball, 'Harold Macmillan and the politics of defence: the market for strategic ideas during the Sandys era revisited', *Twentieth Century British History*, 6 (1995), p. 84.

⁹⁵ Confidential letter from high commissioner to Duncan Sandys, MP, secretary of state for Commonwealth relations, 9 Mar. 1961, DO 196/96, NA.

⁹⁶ T. L. Crosthwait, from UK High Commission in Colombo, to V. C. Martin, CRO, 17 Apr. 1961, and T. L. Crosthwait to N. Pritchard, CMG, CRO, London, 20 Apr. 1961, DO 196/96, NA.

⁹⁷ C. L. Crosthwait, report to N. Pritchard, 1 May 1961, DO 196/96, NA.

In his response to Hamilton Kerr's request on behalf of Ceylon's British business community, the foreign secretary had recognized the Tamil contribution to Ceylon's past as well as their capacity to contribute to its future. The communal problem, as it was described at the time, 'besides being potentially explosive, is also a serious obstacle to Ceylon's political and economic development'. Yet despite understanding the dangers of the present situation he was opposed to the idea of asking the high commissioner to approach the Tamil leaders.⁹⁸ A recurrent theme in the diplomatic correspondence concerning the following year's agitation was the extent to which the Federal party had been able to gain the support of other Tamil political groupings, especially those of the professional community working in Colombo, left-wing groups, and Muslims.⁹⁹ British officials viewed the absence of a truly all-island political movement in 1961 as a point of concern for the Federal party's leaders, who had invested much time, resources, and, finally, their own freedom for the cause.¹⁰⁰ They believed that the Federal party had overplayed its hand by advancing claims for autonomy within a federal state without properly defining the nature of the federalism that they envisaged. This alienated moderate Sinhalese opinion and left little ground for compromise.¹⁰¹ As with British assessments of black nationalism in Africa, they also did not appear to have confidence in the Federalists' ability to rally a divided Tamil polity in Ceylon.

III

At the height of the Federal party's civil disobedience movement in March 1961, Mrs Bandaranaike was in London to attend a Commonwealth prime ministers' conference. At a private meeting with Harold Macmillan at Admiralty House on the 6th, during what is described in the notes as 'a general discussion about the situation in Ceylon', no reference is made to the ongoing agitation at home.¹⁰² Both sides appeared to have studiously avoided the issue. Yet, remarkably, the British High Commission in Colombo relayed almost daily reports to the CRO during the period of unrest, up to 24 April, a week after the declaration by the government of a state of emergency on the island. The absence of comment at the highest level suggests that the Tamil Federal party had not set

⁹⁸ Letter from Secretary of State Home to Sir Hamilton Kerr, 14 Apr. 1960, DO 35/8906, NA.

⁹⁹ For example, see the confidential letter from the high commissioner to Duncan Sandys, MP, secretary of state for Commonwealth relations, 1 Mar. 1961, and C. L. Crosthwait, report to N. Pritchard, 1 May 1961, DO 196/96, NA.

¹⁰⁰ 'M.P.s among 45 arrested in Ceylon', *Times*, 19 Apr. 1961, p. 9.

¹⁰¹ Interestingly, other British experts on Ceylon had quite a different view about the causes of the political impasse between the Tamils and Ceylon's government. See B. H. Farmer's letter protesting the *Times*'s earlier editorial criticizing the Tamil stance: *Times*, 17 Jan. 1961, p. 11.

¹⁰² 'Secret: record of a conversation at Admiralty House on Monday, March 6 1961 at 3.00 p.m.', DO 196/96, NA.

out its political aims in a way that was in keeping with the post-war political consensus in South Asia, and the Federalists' moment in 1960–1 came and went.

Some months before the 1961 agitation, Alexander Morley addressed Lord Home in a confidential despatch. Morley was reflecting on politics in Ceylon in the wake of the first of the two elections of 1960, in March, which had given the Federal party a unique degree of leverage as a strong minority party in the House of Representatives. Morley criticized the immaturity and lack of strength among both the Tamil and the Sinhalese leaders, claiming in the Tamil case that electoral politics was conducted 'essentially between Tamil parties vying with each other in the degree of toughness to be shown towards the Sinhalese', where the Federal party had established itself as 'the toughest of these'. Their hard-line stances were, he guessed, a result of the party leaders' inability to compromise with their own followers. Indeed, he went on, drawing the Sinhala politicians into his analysis:

Neither side enjoys the sort of leadership which knows how to impose realistic decisions upon a public habituated to attitudes rather than constructive policies. On the Sinhalese side, and perhaps to a lesser extent on the Tamil side too, there is the fear that any conciliatory move will immediately be attacked and pilloried as weakness by political rivals far more concerned with their own personal advantage than with the welfare of the country.

In concluding, he expressed doubts that even 'a strong Government, with a clear majority behind it' will most likely, 'in typical Ceylonese fashion', 'avoid grasping the nettle and will prefer to allow the drift to continue'.¹⁰³

The high commissioner's views have been echoed by later commentators. They leave open the question of whether the British were complicit, through the way in which they handled Ceylon's decolonization, in engendering the political situation of the early 1960s. But this would be to overlook the importance of the S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike era in between the two periods. The history of independent Ceylon disrupts some of the better-known narratives of post-colonial politics, just as its 'early' independence had upset the British timetable of decolonization. During the 1950s and early 1960s, Ceylon's independence developed alongside Britain's juggling of various decolonizing projects around the Indian Ocean, where most of its remaining strategic assets were located. If Ceylon had existed, as some have stated, as part of a system that was designed to support the Indian empire, then the loss of India would have meant the disintegration of Ceylon in the British official mind. Yet this was clearly not the case. For more than a decade after its independence, Ceylonese politics continued to play an active and important role in British thinking. By the early 1960s, however, it seemed that the louder was the noise of officialdom in Colombo, the greater was the silence from Whitehall.

¹⁰³ Confidential despatch (no. 6) from UK high commissioner to Ceylon, to Rt Hon. the earl of Home, secretary of state for Commonwealth relations, 20 May 1960, DO 35/8906, NA.

The events of 1956–7, in particular, had left a defining mark on Anglo-Ceylonese relations and there was little further room for any sort of engagement with the Tamil Federalists. In a letter to Morley in March 1959 following his visit to Ceylon, Duncan Sandys had observed that ‘This is a most decisive period in the development of the future pattern of relations between Britain and Ceylon.’¹⁰⁴ If that was the case, then there seemed little evidence that Britain was actively seeking to shape relations in the post-Bandaranaike era. In the end, the British response to the fallout from what amounted to a second decolonization was as much a shrug of the shoulders as a wringing of the hands.

¹⁰⁴ Duncan Sandys to his Excellency Mr A. F. Morley (from Singapore), 31 Mar. 1959, Churchill Archives Centre, papers of Lord Duncan-Sandys, DSND 6/45.