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Introduction: revisiting Westminster in the Caribbean

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Scholarship on the Westminster model in the Caribbean conducted in the late 1980s and 1990s focused primarily on the formal dimensions of democracy and drew mainly positive conclusions about the model’s effectiveness in producing stable democratic states in the region. Since then, however, the Caribbean has undergone radical changes which bring into question the more optimistic assessments of some of the early scholarship. This collection revisits debates about the history, legacies and contemporary implications of the Westminster model of governance in the Caribbean, covering the period from the last decades of British colonial rule to calls for political reform in the present day. The contributors consider how the Westminster political model has been adapted to the conditions of the Caribbean, its impact on Caribbean democracy, and the challenges the model has faced over the period of independence.

Keywords: Westminster model; Caribbean; democracy

Between 1962 and 1983, the majority of Britain’s Caribbean colonies gained independence, achieved through a gradualist and largely consensual process of constitutional decolonisation. Far from marking a clean break with the colonial past, independence consolidated political institutions and norms based on Britain’s Westminster model of government. For the region’s nationalist leaders, there was little question that it should be otherwise. As Williams’ oft-cited statement reminds us – ‘after all, if the British Constitution is good enough for Great Britain, it should be good enough for [us]’ (1955, p. 30) – none of the early independence leaders had seriously considered any alternative to the democratic model into whose norms they had been socialised. In the words of the late Norman Girvan, whose reflections conclude this collection,

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‘[this] implanting of colonial ways of thinking into native elites was one of the outstanding successes of British policy in the Caribbean. It was key to the entrenchment of Westminster government in the soon-to-be-independent states.’

Scholarship on the Westminster model in the Caribbean conducted in the late 1980s and 1990s focused primarily on the formal dimensions of democracy and drew mainly positive conclusions about the model’s effectiveness in producing stable democratic states in the region (Domínguez, 1993; Payne, 1993; Huber, 1993; Sutton, 1999). Since then, however, the Caribbean has undergone radical changes which bring into question the more optimistic assessments of these earlier works. As some scholars in the region have argued, globalisation, the transnational drugs trade, rising crime levels, debt, economic and environmental vulnerability all pose significant threats to Caribbean sovereignty and the power of the state (Ryan, 2001; Girvan, 2011); indeed, some contend that liberal democracy, which the Westminster model was assumed to produce, is in terminal decline.

In the light of current debates about the nature, quality and resilience of democracy in the post-independence Caribbean, it is timely to return to the question of the Westminster model and its application in the region. This collection revisits debates about the history, legacies, and contemporary implications of the Westminster model of governance in the Caribbean, covering the period from the last decades of British colonial rule to calls for political reform in the present day. The contributors consider how the Westminster model has been adapted to the conditions of the Caribbean, its impact on Caribbean democracy, and the challenges the model has faced over the period of independence. These papers form part of a larger project analysing the experience of the Westminster model of governance in the Caribbean over the last 50 years.1

There is broad consensus in the existing scholarship on the characteristics of the Westminster system as it was adapted in the Caribbean (Domínguez, 1993; Domínguez, Pastor, & Worrell, 1993; Payne, 1993; Huber, 1993; Ryan, 1999; Sutton, 1999; Hinds, 2008; Bishop, 2010). Although there has been some disagreement over whether the model might more accurately be described as a ‘Whitehall’ or ‘Westminster-Whitehall’ system (Ghany, 1994; Ryan, 1999, p. 8), most analysts characterise it as a modified or ‘adapted’ Westminster model whose key features include constitutionalism; the Prime Minister as head of government, not head of state; Cabinet government with Ministers drawn from an elected legislature; parliamentary sovereignty; competitive elections; pluralist representation; official recognition of the role of the opposition; and the assumption of civil service neutrality (Payne, 1993; Ryan, 1999; Bishop, 2010).

The region’s ‘institutional fidelity to the architecture of Westminster’ (Ryan, 1999, p. 7) has been seen as central to the relative success of Anglophone
Caribbean democracy in comparison with other post-colonial states (Domínguez, 1993; Huber, 1993; Payne, 1993; Hinds, 2008). Positive assessments of the Caribbean’s ‘[impressive] capacity to sustain liberal democratic polities’ (Domínguez, 1993, p. 3) have been reinforced by quantitative assessments of the region in global rankings such as the Worldwide Governance Indicators, which ‘rank the twelve independent states of the Commonwealth Caribbean above all other developing world regions’ on all of their chosen indicators, including voice and accountability, political stability, government effectiveness, control of corruption, and rule of law (Vernon, 2013, p. 13). Analysis of the practice of Westminster in the Caribbean, however, has also recognised democratic deficiencies associated with the application of the model in Caribbean small states. These include unchecked executive power and the emasculation of the legislature, a lack of separation between the executive and legislative branches of government, an adversarial ‘winner takes all’ political culture, corruption, clientelism, and political tribalism (Stone, 1986; Ryan, 1999; Hinds, 2008; Vernon, 2013). As Cynthia Barrow-Giles in this issue states, ‘We certainly cannot always claim that parliament is robust, that political abuses do not occur, that corruption is at a minimum’. The articles in this collection grapple with the ‘duality’ of the Westminster model, weighing up both its anti-democratic tendencies and its capacity to facilitate progressive reforms. Together they raise questions about inclusion and exclusion, participation and representation, reform and revolution. Who benefits from the maintenance of the system? How do race and gender figure within its institutions and political culture? And what alternatives to the Westminster system have been proposed?

Beginning with the historical roots of the British political tradition in the Caribbean, the contribution by Lodge, Stirton, and Moloney takes up the neglected subject of the civil service, examining the nature of the Whitehall model of administration and how it functioned in colonial Jamaica. A series of reports on administration in the colony produced between 1919 and 1949 reveal a catalogue of ‘doctrinal and institutional factors that impeded the responsiveness of the Jamaican civil service’, including the failure to develop local administrative talent, the predominance of expatriates in senior positions, and systems of accountability that encouraged loyalty to the metropolitan government. Arguing that the colonial era public service bargain was founded on the insulation of civil servants from domestic political elites, the article shows why post-independence leaders came to view the British administrative legacy as ‘anathema to representativeness and an obstacle to postcolonial development’.

Attempts to rectify discriminatory hiring and promotion practices in the civil service and private sector are taken up in the contribution by Altink, which explores the extent to which certain features of the Westminster model ‘made it easier or more difficult for the government to create a more equal labour market’. While the concentration of executive power and lack of
separation between the executive and the legislature is often seen as a negative characteristic of the Westminster model in the Caribbean, Altink shows how this enabled governments to push through significant reforms, such as the Jamaicanisation and nationalisation policies of the 1960s and 1970s. However, this same feature also stifled demands for change, and the lack of transparency facilitated the politicisation of the public service over which the government had more control. The article raises important questions about the ‘duality’ of the Westminster model and the extent to which it can either expedite or act as an obstacle to socio-economic change.

Issues of equality and inclusion are also at the heart of the contribution by Barrow-Giles, who provides a valuable analysis of the gender dynamics of Caribbean parliamentary politics. In the context of global advances in the representation of women in parliament, the Commonwealth Caribbean has lagged behind, with most governments ‘[failing] to meet commitments to increase women’s representation in any substantial way’. Barrow-Giles proposes that the institutional context and political culture of Westminster in the Caribbean have not been conducive to encouraging women’s participation in the political sphere and have not created the ‘political opportunity structure’ that would allow women access to decision-making or to setting the policy agenda. Central to this is the ‘prevailing political culture of the political model, with its emphasis on strong party line, adversarial politics and strong party discipline’; the ‘partisan effect’ discouraging those few women who do enter parliament from advancing a policy agenda outside that set by the male-dominated party. To advance legislation aimed at increasing gender equality in Caribbean society more broadly will thus require not only an increase in women’s participation in parliament but also a fundamental change in the culture of political parties.

As Barrow-Giles indicates, the need to transform the political institutions and political culture of Westminster in the Caribbean remains ‘a major cause for concern’. Demands for more inclusive and participatory forms of democracy have, throughout the period of independence, largely been channelled into efforts to reform the existing Westminster system. However, for some, the transformation of Caribbean democracy meant not reform, but the total rejection of the model itself. The contribution by Quinn analyses the radical challenge to the Westminster model in the Caribbean as articulated by Black Power and Marxist-oriented organisations in Trinidad and Tobago in the 1970s. Their critique of the Westminster model, and the alternatives they proposed, fed directly into the model of ‘revolutionary democracy’ embraced by the Grenada Revolution, whose experiments with village, parish and workplace assemblies remain one of the most radical deviations from ‘bourgeois liberal democracy’ ever attempted in the Commonwealth Caribbean. What lessons might these Caribbean attempts to formulate alternatives to the Westminster model offer for the present day?
The Caribbean radical tradition is represented here in the contribution by the late, great Professor Norman Girvan. In his unique voice, Girvan offers personal reflections on the experience of Westminster in the Caribbean over 50 years of independence. As a young student at the University of the West Indies in the early 1960s, and later as a leading figure in the region-wide New World Group of radical intellectuals, Girvan was among the earliest critics of the democratic deficiencies of the Westminster model, viewing it as an integral part of an ‘independence pact’ designed to preserve the status quo. The ‘preservation of the laws, institutions, and symbols of the colonial state’ – not least the retention of the British monarch as head of state – connoted ‘continuity, rather than rupture’, institutionalising ‘a fractured psyche of political allegiance among those who were to be responsible for running the affairs of state’. What independence, Girvan asks, can be founded on a constitution formulated as a Royal Order in Council?

Analysing recent developments in the region, Girvan was also among the first to identify new threats to Caribbean independence, sovereignty, and democracy posed by the pressures of neo-liberal globalisation, transnational organised crime, untramelled out-migration, unsustainable levels of debt, and the deprivations of climate change. For Girvan, these pressures constitute ‘existential threats’ to the very survival of Caribbean territories as ‘viable economies, functional polities, [and] cohesive societies’. Arguing that the region is now at a ‘historical turning point’, Girvan calls for a reconceptualisation of Caribbean sovereignty, not as ‘the possession of certain constitutional and juridical attributes by the nation state’ but as the emancipation of the mind: ‘[above] all, sovereignty means the capacity of a society and its citizens to think for themselves’. We dedicate this special issue to Norman’s memory and celebrate his aspiration: no less than ‘the invention of a Caribbean democracy’.

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Notes

1. The papers in this collection were presented at the inaugural conference of the ‘Westminster in the Caribbean: History, Legacies, Challenges’ research network held at the Institute of the Americas, UCL in September 2013. A second major conference was held at the University of the West Indies, Mona, in September 2014. The project was generously funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

2. We reproduce here the text of Professor Girvan’s opening keynote, delivered at the conference ‘Assessing Westminster in the Caribbean: Then and Now’, Institute of the Americas, University College London, 19 September 2013.

References


