

SECOND LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

(Constituted under the British Guiana (Constitution) (Temporary Provisions) Orders in Council, 1953 and 1956).

Wednesday, 3rd February, 1960.

The Council met at 2 p.m.

PRESENT :

Speaker, His Honour Sir Donald Jackson

Chief Secretary, Hon. D. M. Hedges

Attorney-General, Hon. A. M. I. Austin, Q.C.

Financial Secretary, Hon. F. W. Essex, C.M.G.

} *ex officio*

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| The Honourable Dr. C. B. Jagan | —Member for Eastern Berbice (Minister of Trade and Industry) |
| „ „ B. H. Benn | —Member for Essequibo River (Minister of Natural Resources) |
| „ „ Janet Jagan | —Member for Western Essequibo (Minister of Labour, Health and Housing) |
| Ram Karran | —Member for Demerara-Essequibo (Minister of Communications and Works) |
| „ „ B. S. Rai | —Member for Central Demerara (Minister of Community Development and Education). |
| Mr. R. B. Gajraj | —Nominated Member |
| „ W. O. R. Kendall | —Member for New Amsterdam |
| „ R. C. Tello | —Nominated Member |
| „ F. Bowman | —Member for Demerara River |
| „ L. F. S. Burnham | —Member for Georgetown Central |
| „ S. Campbell | —Member for North Western District |
| „ A. L. Jackson | —Member for Georgetown North |
| „ E. B. Beharry | —Member for Eastern Demerara |
| „ S. M. Saffee | —Member for Western Berbice |
| „ Ajodha Singh | —Member for Berbice River |
| „ Jai Narine Singh | —Member for Georgetown South |
| „ R. E. Davis | —Nominated Member |
| „ A. M. Fredericks | —Nominated Member |
| „ H. J. M. Hubbard | —Nominated Member |
| „ A. G. Tasker, O.B.E. | —Nominated Member. |

Mr. I. Crum Ewing — Clerk of the Legislature

Mr. E. V. Viapree — Assistant Clerk of the Legislature.

The Clerk read prayers.

MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Council held on Tuesday, 2nd February, 1960, as printed and circulated, were taken as read and confirmed.

ORDER OF THE DAY

**B.W.I.A.: WITHDRAWAL OF
PREFERENTIAL TREATMENT
PROPOSED**

Mr. Speaker: At the adjournment yesterday the following Motion, which was moved by the hon. Member for Georgetown South, was in the course of debate:

“Be it resolved: That this Council recommends to Government the withdrawal of preferential treatment to the British West Indian Airways and the establishment of Atkinson Field as a port of call for as many airlines as may wish to call there.”

The hon. Minister of Communications and Works may resume.

The Minister of Communications and Works (Mr. Ram Karran): I quoted from the Five Year Agreement which this Territory had signed with the other West Indian Territories laying down certain obligations on British West Indian Airways. I was, at the adjournment yesterday, trying to point out the difficulty of expanding Atkinson Field — as had been suggested by the hon. Mover of the Motion—to accommodate bigger aircraft, and I think he said, particularly jet aircraft.

I think I made the point during my remarks that traffic conditions being what they were, and admitting that the type of service which we get was not the best — and which was what we were contributing to — this did not mean that we should jump to jet aircraft. A simple illustration of this is that if you have accommodation for 500 passengers on a train, you do not provide for all. It would be a very great civil engineering problem to extend Atkinson Field.

That brings me to the point of the construction of a new airfield near Georgetown. I think the hon. Mover suggested that Airports like Idlewild were

25 to 30 miles from the cities. That may be so, but he did not tell of airports near their cities. I think he expressed some fears of the airport being near the City. I can assure him that in considering the question of having an airfield near Georgetown, proximity to the City is one of the factors that will be taken into account by the planners and other people going into this matter. I do not think that the hon. Mover, as a lawyer, would seriously advocate that Government should spend more money on Atkinson Field while knowing the conditions under which we occupy it. It is what may be described as foreign territory, which has to be given up at 48 hours' notice in case of activation. Government is doing everything it possibly can to extend the facilities — water, electricity, runways — at Atkinson Field, and is considering whether it should build a new airport outside of Atkinson Field.

While Government is not satisfied with the shortcomings of B.W.I.A., it must work within the limits of the Agreement to which I referred. For instance, we have the right in British Guiana to refuse any decision on the part of B.W.I.A. We have a say in the fixing of fares. This is not so with respect to the other Airlines.

We have conditions so laid down that we must abide with them. I think the hon. Member, who is a lawyer, could not advise this Government to abrogate an agreement which has been faithfully signed by the territories. I can assure this Council — I know a lot of things appear inside and outside this Council — that Government has no intention whatever of abrogating any agreement at any time. Perhaps, the article which appeared in “The Daily Argosy” of July 1, 1959, will give an indication to the hon. Member as to the situation of B.W.I.A. And I want to make it clear that I do not wish to defend B.W.I.A. in any way, but this is what the article said:

“A British Parliamentary Committee, in a report on the world's position in

relation to Britain's State-run airlines B.O.A.C. and B.E.A., today referred to heavy losses on the operations of British West Indian Airways.

The losses, the review said, were caused by the general recession in the airline industry, by the difficult nature of operations in the West Indies by re-equipment, and to the fact that B.O.A.C. have themselves, taken over some B.W.I.A. Services".

It goes on, in another paragraph:

"Furthermore, when the West Indies achieved self-Government, B.O.A.C. must try to retain their goodwill in the area.

There have been heavy losses on B.W.I.A. operations, amounting this last year, probably to £700,000."

I mentioned yesterday the fact that we had been made to receive a number of Viscount flights from Trinidad, but I understand that B.O.A.C., which had supplied these Viscounts to B.W.I.A., had very great losses with B.W.I.A. and had to take back some of the Viscount aircraft. At the same time, a representative of B.O.A.C., who sits now on B.W.I.A., had made recommendations in order to reduce these losses suffered by B.W.I.A. But the reason why we have four Viscount flights is because aircraft are not there.

I wish to say that it has been agreed by B.W.I.A. and B.O.A.C. and by the Federation of the West Indies that a comprehensive survey should be undertaken as to the requirements in the near future. That comprehensive survey will cover not only the requirements but some of the points we have had in mind for some time, and we ourselves have expressed the wish to be represented at these talks in order to make sure that British Guiana gets the best service having regard to what is likely to come out of this survey.

I understand that this survey should have been undertaken sometime ago, but there is a lot of difficulty to get suitable people. There is real difficulty to get people — people who are not airline officials or persons who are not associated

with any of the big airlines. It is necessary to get persons who are completely outside the operations and who have no interest in B.W.I.A. The names have already been mentioned, and I hope that this survey will be carried out shortly and that British Guiana, which has expressed the wish to have representation at these talks, will have the opportunity so that some of the problems affecting our service from B.W.I.A. will be adjusted. As soon as this comprehensive survey of the transport needs of the British Caribbean, including British Guiana, is gone into, I think we will be in a position to acquaint Council of the situation and how our needs are likely to be met.

This Government cannot support the Motion as it stands:

"That this Council recommends to Government the withdrawal of preferential treatment to the British West Indian Airways . . ."

I assume that the preferential treatment to which the hon. Member refers, includes the return of landing fees which is contained in the Agreement and laid down fully. As I said, I hardly think the hon. Member, who is a lawyer, could advise this Government to abrogate this Agreement which will come to an end next year.

The other part of the Motion which calls for —

"The establishment of Atkinson Field as a port of call for as many airlines as may wish to call there"

is, in itself, inaccurate because Atkinson Field is such an airport which caters for any plane which chooses to go there. The hon. Member referred to cabotage, but it is in the Agreement and I think it is in the international agreements with all airline operators. I think he asked why is it that Air France cannot take passengers to Trinidad. That question can best be answered by saying that B.W.I.A. cannot take up passengers from French territories, going elsewhere.

[MR. RAM KARRAN]

That is all I wish to say, and to indicate that Government cannot support the Motion as it now stands.

Mr. Tasker: Mr. Speaker, I regret I was unable to be present here yesterday, and the reports of the debate yesterday are, so far, inadequate, so I can only hope that I would not be treading on the grounds which had already been covered. Personally, I have great sympathy with the intention behind this Motion though I understand the reason for it. The hon. Minister has just said the Government cannot support it in its present form. I can see that, because this whole problem of cabotage is tied up with the question of an international agreement which, no matter how unreasonable it may seem in terms of the specific problems in British Guiana, must be seen against a wider background. World-wide travel is involved and I think I am right in saying while we suffer from some of the snags, we also stand to benefit from a wider area of world travel to come.

Again, I think one of the problems of the cabotage restrictions is that it seems to me that Government would have to devise some other method of subsidy. I would like to see a greater number of foreign airlines having facilities of landing and taking up passengers in British Guiana and Trinidad — a wider or comprehensive service. But I think we have to recognize that these airlines are not going to come in here simply because British Guiana is made an open port. They are only going to come in if it is worthwhile. They have to be sure they are taking up passengers and freight to justify their calls here.

Someone has pointed out recently that in the case of an aircraft flying from Belem to Trinidad direct, the mechanical problem to call at Atkinson is something of the order of one-and-a-half hours unproductive power. I think it would make more sense if there was cause to say that British Guiana is badly served

with seat potential. I am given to understand that the seat potential for British Guiana has been 1,300 seats per week of which B.W.I.A. has just under 50% and that that seat potential is, in fact, fully adequate for British Guiana's needs. In other words, you cannot say that more people are applying for seats than there are seats for them.

This leads me to the suggestion, and particularly in view of the problem of subsidies and the comments the hon. Minister made on the losses of B.W.I.A. which is well known to us, whether the problem is not so much in trying to bring in more airlines but rather to press very vigorously now for a much greater degree of flexibility in the application of the cabotage restrictions.

The hon. Minister referred just now to a survey of the air transport requirements in the Caribbean and British Guiana which is shortly to take place. That is long overdue. But what I think British Guiana can very well do, without waiting for the results of the survey, is to press for a less precise application of the cabotage regulation. It is an easy thing to say that the Agreement provides certain restrictions and that the Agreement must be carried out by the civil servants. This is not a criticism of British Guiana only. It has been my experience in Trinidad that these restrictions are applied according to the letter of the law with complete disregard of the spirit, and you get a ridiculous situation. Time and time again officials and businessmen coming to British Guiana to investigate are delayed in Trinidad due to the fact that they are told "there are no B.W.I.A. planes, therefore, you cannot fly by any other carrier."

This is where the thing breaks down. It is not a matter of space but a lack of flexibility in handling passengers flying between areas covered by cabotage restrictions, and inability to recognize that there should be much more flexibility to allow people to travel

by Pan American World Airways or Air France, or whatever service that has space and is willing to carry passengers. I have not, by any means, discussed this matter with all the carriers, but I have discussed it with the representative of one large carrier, and I am given to understand that if we could get this greater flexibility we could go a very long way to provide a better service not only for Guianese and others wishing to fly northwards, but also for people from outside who want to come here.

I would ask Government to consider the matter carefully. I am not aware of the technicalities of the agreement, but is it not true that we could apply the Regulations with more flexibility with Trinidad and B.W.I.A. without in any sense abrogating the agreement?

Mr. Gajraj: In my case I was at Atkinson Field yesterday for the greater part of the day. I left Georgetown to meet a couple of friends who were coming to British Guiana by a B.W.I.A. plane which was scheduled to land at Atkinson Field at 9.40 a.m. At about 8.30 yesterday morning I checked by telephone with the Georgetown office and was told that the flight was on schedule, so I made my way to the airport, and to my great surprise and, indeed, my indignation, when I arrived there I was told the plane would be about an hour late. Half an hour later it was announced over the public address system that the flight had been put back another half-hour, and in that way we were kept on tenter-hooks until about 12.15 p.m., when we were told that in all probability the plane would not leave Piarco for another couple of hours, therefore, unless we wished to stay there all afternoon, we could just as well go back to Georgetown and return later. I took the hint and started on my way back, only to find that within 10 minutes of my arrival at home there was a telephone call intimating that the plane would be in at 2.30 p.m. So I went back to Atkinson Field to receive my friends, and did not return to Georgetown until 4.30 p.m.

That is a personal experience which only goes to show that there is a considerable amount of hardship inflicted upon travellers and those who have to meet 'planes, by the service we are given by B.W.I.A. I fully agree with the Minister that since this Government has an agreement with B.W.I.A. as a national carrier, this Council should not ask Government to abrogate its agreement, but I feel that the Council should insist upon Government to make it very clear to B.W.I.A. that in the performance of their contract they are not giving the service to British Guiana which was expected of them when they were recognized as national carriers.

That should be forced home upon them, and perhaps it would be a very good thing if we could take this opportunity which is afforded by the hon. Member's Motion, to amend its terms so as to recommend to the Government that after the expiration of the present agreement no preferential treatment be given unless in a new agreement adequate safeguards are provided for those who make use of air travel which is increasingly becoming a form of travel by people who have to cross the ocean.

The question of cabotage is indeed a very ticklish one which we all know is governed by international agreement, therefore we cannot recommend to Government that that aspect of the agreement should not be carried out. I agree with the hon. Nominated Member, Mr. Tasker, that we should endeavour, within the framework of that agreement, to make the conditions as flexible as possible, so that people coming into this country and those leaving it may be able to travel by foreign airlines when the national carriers are unable to provide aircraft in time, and we should be able to get this done without having to wait for considerable periods of time and the anxiety that is caused by having to contact the officials concerned in order to get their consent. In my own experience the Civil Aviation officials, when properly apprised of the urgency of the

[MR. GAJRAJ]

occasion, willingly grant permission, but it is very difficult at times to get them in good time, and to be able to reach the person who has to make the final decision. So that I can see a lot of merit in the suggestion by Mr. Tasker to which I hope the Government will pay heed.

The Minister has made it clear that in its present form the Government cannot accept the Motion, and I am wondering whether we would not be right, in view of the general agreement on both sides of the Table that the service given by B.W.I.A. should be improved considerably, to amend the Motion to make it possible for Government to accept the views which find common agreement.

I have been endeavouring to prepare an Amendment which I think would meet the views which have been expressed on both sides of the Table. I therefore move that the Motion be amended by the deletion of all the words after the word "recommends" in the first line, and the substitution therefor of the words: "that, after the expiration of the current agreement, no preferential treatment be given to British West Indian Airways without proper and adequate safeguards."

The idea is that by this Motion we may be able to indicate in no uncertain terms that we are dissatisfied with the service we are getting from the national carriers at the present time, and serve notice on them that unless we are given better treatment, the benefits they derive from the present agreement with the Government will cease at its expiration. I feel sure that it would be in the interest of the country that at the expiration of the present agreement some other agreement should be entered into which would guarantee to us the service we need, and provide penalties for failure to carry out the terms of the agreement.

I note that the hon. Minister did not mention that because B.W.I.A. were

losing a lot of money, in their general plan for reorganization some of the Viscount aircraft which we had hoped would have been used in the service, have been withdrawn, and perhaps are being used by B.O.A.C. If B.W.I.A. could not make their service pay is no reason why they should withdraw good aircraft and thereby create a shortage of efficient planes and deterioration of the service they have contracted to perform. What is happening now is that the old Dakotas seem to be arriving on time while the new aircraft are always late, with the frequent excuse of maintenance troubles. It seems to me that they do not have a spare aircraft to put into service in case any of the planes develop engine troubles. That is what happened yesterday, and it happened many weeks ago when an aircraft which was due at nine o'clock in the morning did not arrive until midnight.

It is essential that B.W.I.A. be told that unless they are prepared to spend money in order to give us the type of service we want, at the expiration of the agreement they will just have to take their chance in British Guiana like any other airline.

Mr. Hubbard: I would like to second the Amendment moved by the hon. Nominated Member, Mr. Gajraj, and commend it to the Council with the view that precept is more consistent than example. That notwithstanding, I feel we must call upon the British West Indian Airways to set us the example of a good service if they want to maintain their preferential treatment. I do not think that much remains to be said, and I am, principally speaking, attempting to analyse the general dissatisfaction with the service currently being given and to impress, if further impression is necessary, upon the Government that every effort should be made to present the best service *vis-à-vis* this public aircraft carrier.

Dr. Jagan: I would like to join with hon. Members in expressing grave

dissatisfaction with the present services which are being offered to inhabitants of this country who may wish to travel and also visitors to British Guiana. Recalling the last four or five times I have had to travel out of this country, my experience has been that on every single occasion — and I emphasize the word “every” — there was a tremendous delay, due to the fact that either they did not have enough spare parts available, or because one or two of the planes were out of order. It seems to me that the criticisms levelled by Members on the opposite side are really of grave import and ought to be given due attention and weight by the carriers, the British West Indian Airways.

To return to my experience on the last four or five occasions: I found that for one reason or another the planes which were supposed to leave sometimes in the morning left in the evening. When I was returning from the United Kingdom a plane that was supposed to leave at nine o'clock in the morning did not leave until six o'clock in the evening. Recently, on returning from Jamaica, I found that a plane was scheduled to leave at 11.30 a.m., but it did not leave until about 5.30 p.m. Appointments which I had in Trinidad based on my time of arrival could not be kept because I arrived in Trinidad about three o'clock in the morning. The people were naturally disappointed. Only a few days ago, a plane with which I was to depart, I believe, at ten o'clock in the morning did not leave until six o'clock in the evening. I was fortunate to be told in advance of the delay, but when I got up to the airport in the afternoon I found that people were stranded there having gone up in the morning. I complained about this, and I found that although the information of the delay was received the people were not informed. Many people had to be sitting around, in very inconvenient circumstances, from nine o'clock in the morning. There was sufficient time to tell them. It was most unsatisfactory, and I agree with hon. Members. I myself am directing a letter

to the Management of the Board of the B.W.I.A. I have already discussed the matter with the Minister of Communications and Works because I consider it a very grave issue. I feel that Members should support the Amendment moved by the last speaker.

Mr. Speaker : Does anybody else wish to speak on the Amendment?

Mr. Jai Narine Singh : Mr. Speaker, I wish to accept this Amendment moved by the hon. Nominated Member, Mr. Gajraj. I wish to make the point that an air disaster is hanging over the people of British Guiana. This twin-engined aircraft—this 25-year-old piston-engined aircraft is going to crash one of these days and every single one of the persons travelling in it will lose his or her life.

The hon. Minister of Communications and Works spoke of the Agreement. We Members of the Legislature do not have access to these Agreements nor are we informed of them. Not so long ago I approached the Attorney-General for a copy of an Agreement which this Government had signed and it was impossible to obtain a copy though it was binding upon the Government. Often we cannot help the Government because the Government is tight-fisted and does what it pleases for the common good.

I feel that the record of the deliberations on this Motion should be forwarded to the Directors of B.W.I.A. so that they may be apprised of the sentiments prevailing in the Legislature of British Guiana, a body which looks after the welfare of the people of this country.

I think that in this debate we have touched on some vital issues confronting this country. I said yesterday that British Guiana is at the moment at a disadvantage in not having a deep harbour. We are thinking of having a tourist trade. We therefore want good aircraft coming here. I made it clear yesterday that I was almost sure that the United States Government, if approached, would chip in

[MR. JAI NARINE SINGH]

and assist us to extend Atkinson Field. I have seen mountains removed and swamps filled in order that airfields may be built. From my knowledge of the subject I think that earth removal at Atkinson Field would be easy because we find a lot of residual quartz sand there. I have certain connections near Atkinson Field, and I know the terrain is not as difficult as the Minister of Communications and Works has made it out to be.

In this country the approach to everything is that it is impossible or seems impossible. What was impossible yesterday has become an easy matter today to other parts of the world, and it is for men to make up their minds to do big things for the welfare of the community. We have to resolve to make up our minds to go forward. Whatever the difficulties, we must overcome them. Atkinson Field is our only bet for a good airfield for a long time.

The hon. Minister also referred to the possibility of our having to leave Atkinson Field at 48 hours' notice. That exists, but what Government in the world having an air base in a friendly country would ask that country to vacate it in 48 hours when it is known that it is the only airfield available for civil aviation purposes? I think, as I said yesterday, that if the Minister, his colleagues and the British Government approached the United States, told the Government of our present needs and request money and equipment to extend the airfield — in any case it will be U.S. property when it is finished — I am sure there would be no great difficulty. We must not approach the welfare of this country in a negative way, but from a positive point of view. With a negative approach you can never succeed. That is my way of looking at things, and it is a true way of achieving success.

To come back to what the hon. Minister of Communications and Works told us: that this Government does not wish to abrogate the Agreement. I

will not advise them to do that, but abrogation can only take place when there is a breach. If there is a breach, then B.W.I.A. has committed a breach by not carrying passengers on the right schedule from two hours to 48 hours and using dilapidated aircraft risking passengers' lives. We have a lot of goodwill from B.W.I.A. and we do not wish to destroy that goodwill. Therefore I think that we must in the circumstances ask, "where is our Government?"

I think that B.W.I.A. is giving us very poor service for such high fares. Where is the Government? And when I refer to the Government I do not refer to the present Government, but the Government of 1956 which signed this Agreement. B.W.I.A. is charging \$136 as the fare to Trinidad and back. Why is not the Government making enough effort to reduce the fares between Trinidad and British Guiana?

My hon. Friend reminds me that B.W.I.A. are losing money. They are like the Transport and Harbours Department. They have inadequate aircraft and, unless they put modern and more aircraft into service, they are bound to lose money. I am sure that the money they are losing is not as a result of flights from British Guiana to Trinidad, but from places like St. Lucia, St. Kitts and Antigua where they have to maintain service. I feel that British Guiana is one of the mainstay if, according to Mr. Tasker, 550 passengers fly out by B.W.I.A. per week. But these aircraft are incapable of carrying more than 40 or 50 passengers. I think the Dakota carries 25 and the Viscount carries 48. That means they are going laden. Whenever I am going by B.W.I.A. they are flying to capacity. Then why and how are they losing money? They are losing on the other services. I am sure that if any private company had three aircraft flying between here and Trinidad every day it can never lose money because it will be as if they were special flights.

The hon. Nominated Member, Mr. Tasker, did make a point on the question

of flexibility and the quality of the service. I certainly would not like to travel with B.W.I.A. when I can travel by Air France or K.L.M. I feel that we must do something to make sure that we are not burdened with the problems of B.W.I.A. We are already burdened with the problems of the people of British Guiana and, consequently, the Amendment moved by the hon. Nominated Member, Mr. Gajraj, meets the purpose. And the hon. Minister who supports it says he has served notice on B.W.I.A. to improve their services or get out of British Guiana. I am sure that other airlines are willing to give us better service than B.W.I.A. I feel it is time we take a firm stand. I will recommend to the Government that they speak to the British Government — that the Majority Party informs Her Majesty's Government — that we, in British Guiana, are displeased with the number of flights which are allowed to land at Atkinson Field by other airlines.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, there is a Motion and an Amendment. As I understand, there is the expression of view by the Mover of the Motion that he accepts the Amendment; then I shall put the amended Motion to you :

"That this Council recommends that, after the expiration of the current agree-

ment, no preferential treatment be given to British West Indian Airways without proper and adequate safeguards."

Question put, and agreed to.

Motion passed as amended.

BRITISH GUIANA RICE PRODUCERS ASSOCIATION (AMENDMENT) BILL

The Minister of Natural Resources (Mr. Benn) : Mr. Speaker, I am sorry, but I regret that the Government is unable to continue today with the debate on the Rice Producers Bill.

ADJOURNMENT

The Chief Secretary (Mr. Hedges) : I beg to move that Council do now adjourn to two o'clock on Friday.

Mr. Speaker : Do you say on Friday?

The Chief Secretary: The Bill might be ready by tomorrow. I beg to move that Council do now adjourn until two o'clock tomorrow.

Council adjourned accordingly, at 3.10 p.m.