

Mischief of the Franchise: Suffrage Expansion in the British Empire, Ceylon 1927-31

Iza Ding, Northwestern University
Dan Slater, University of Michigan

Abstract

Britain unexpectedly introduced universal manhood suffrage to a non-white, non-settler colony for the very first time in 1931 in Ceylon – what is present-day Sri Lanka. This decision ran against the grain of British political thought and political development, which counseled extreme caution in any extension of the franchise beyond the propertied and the literate. It also ran counter to the preferences of Ceylon's indigenous leaders, who expressed little interest in suffrage expansion in their testimonies before the Donoughmore Commission, which came to Ceylon from November 1927 - January 1928 to devise a new constitution. Through what collective reasoning process did the Donoughmore Commission decide to make Ceylon what would henceforth be considered the first non-white democracy in the world? We argue that British officials began during their visit to Ceylon to think about "safeguards" in a fundamentally new way. Reversing the conventional, quintessentially British logic that anti-majoritarian safeguards (e.g. courts, veto powers, and most of all a strictly restricted suffrage) are essential to constrain the irrational impulses of the general voting public, the Donoughmore Commission gradually concluded that Ceylon's population urgently needed mass enfranchisement to safeguard the colony against the empowerment of a narrow, non-responsive indigenous political elite. What one commissioner called "the mischief of the franchise" lay not in a franchise that was too wide, as one might expect given British political traditions, but too narrow. British officials arrived in Ceylon wondering what if any safeguards elections required; they left concluding that elections were the required safeguards themselves.

Introduction: Suffrage by Surprise

The road to universal suffrage was long and treacherous. Worries that the mass public was unworthy of the vote, or would install a "tyranny of the majority" if empowered, hindered democratization from roughly the middle of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th. Only after World War II did popular elections dispense with most formal limitations on the franchise.

How was fear of universal suffrage overcome? The prospect of universal suffrage used to fill political elites with trepidation and dread – especially in settings where the population was not white. How were such concerns eventually allayed? How did political elites reach the conclusion that democratic elections need not include the "safeguard" of restrictions on the franchise itself? This was an especially difficult conclusion to reach in Europe's Asian, African, and Middle Eastern colonies, where universal manhood suffrage meant empowering impoverished majorities of color for the very first time.

We explore this question by poring over the 2000-plus pages of public deliberations and private correspondences of the Donoughmore Commission: a British body created in 1927 to investigate conditions in the colony of Ceylon (since independence, Sri Lanka). Named after its chairman, a 52-year-old conservative Tory aristocrat named Richard Hely-Hutchinson who was also by birthright the 6th Earl of Donoughmore, the Commission visited and widely toured the island of Ceylon for two months from November 1927 to January 1928. It conducted 143 separate testimonies with diverse witnesses of Ceylonese, British, and Indian descent. Its main charge was to prepare a new constitution to replace the constitution of 1924, which had come to be seen as dysfunctional. Some of the 143 witnesses before the Donoughmore Commission (mostly ethnic-majority Ceylonese and Indian migrant) wanted the pace of “constitutional advance” to be expedited; other witnesses (mostly British and ethnic-minority Tamil Hindu) preferred that the status quo ante of the far more restrictive 1833 constitution be restored, or at a minimum that forward progress toward Ceylonese self-rule be halted or slowed. For reasons we elaborate below, some kind of change from the gridlocked status quo was seen as inevitable. But the Commission’s main recommendation – the immediate introduction of universal manhood suffrage against a backdrop where only 4% of Ceylonese residents enjoyed the franchise, and when no other non-white-majority European colony enjoyed anything of the sort – was entirely unexpected. Especially because nobody of influence in Ceylon explicitly demanded it, or back home in Britain explicitly desired it.

The historic importance of the Donoughmore Commission can scarcely be overstated. Its recommendation in favor of universal manhood suffrage marked the very first time that the British introduced any such thing beyond its white settler dominions. Ceylon henceforth became known as – and Sri Lanka is still routinely referred to this day as – “Asia’s first democracy.” This actually understates the novelty of what the Donoughmore Commission accomplished on regional grounds. As the foremost scholar of the Donoughmore Constitution, Jane Russell, matter-of-factly put it: “It was the first time that universal franchise under a secret ballot had been tried in any form in a non-European nation.”

This outcome was surprising on both a practical and theoretical level. Practically speaking, the surprise lay in the fact that nobody—neither the politicians in London nor the indigenous elites—was actively demanding suffrage expansion when the Donoughmore Commission decided to expand it. Much less of the testimony the Commission heard centered on questions of the franchise than on a wide variety of seemingly unrelated issues. This meant the public testimonies offered essentially no hint that a veritable revolution in Ceylon’s suffrage was in the works. This political outcome was a legitimate surprise to key stakeholders in imperial and Ceylonese politics at the time.

That being said, there are important theoretical and historical reasons to be surprised in this instance as well. Given the general trajectory of British political development and the most prominent guiding tenets of British political philosophy, it is difficult to fathom why British colonial officials introduced full manhood suffrage practically overnight to a

deeply impoverished, poorly educated non-white citizenry. If there was concerted pressure on the Donoughmore Commission to expand the franchise dramatically and quickly, that would represent a sensible explanation; but as we will soon show, there was not. What happened in Ceylon in 1927-31 was thus both surprisingly precocious, in a historical sense, and surprisingly revolutionary in a theoretical sense.

The Road to Donoughmore

The Donoughmore Commission was established in 1927 to solve a perceived constitutional crisis in Ceylon. Depending on one's perspective, it was a crisis either several centuries or just several years in the making.

From a several-*centuries* perspective, the road to crisis began when the British East India Company seized the island of Ceylon from Dutch control in 1796. As quickly as 1802, "Company Rule" had ended – more than fifty years before it ended in India, in the wake of the Sepoy Rebellion. Ceylon was thus made a Crown Colony under effective British military rule. The entirety of the island, including the stubborn inland, upland territory of Kandy was subdued by 1815.

A royal commission called the Colebrook-Cameron Commission wrote Ceylon's first constitution in 1833, preceding Donoughmore by almost exactly a century. This Crown Colony system saw the establishment of a Legislative Council, staffed mostly by British settlers, as a local simulacrum of the British Parliament, where sovereignty theoretically rested. In reality, a British Governor-General wielded virtually unbridled power. For the most part the colony remained both peaceful and legally stable. The main exception came with the Matale Rebellion in 1847, when deteriorating economic conditions led to a local uprising and brutal crackdown followed by a temporary suspension of rights. The Disraeli government in London saw this as an overreaction and sacked the Ceylon government after a series of sensational hearings at Westminster. Unrest in the Colebrook-Cameron era was exceedingly rare.

Imperialism was expensive. To pay for the entire operation, and to generate the massive profits for British private enterprises that would ultimately give colonialism much of its *raison d'être*, the British established a vibrant plantation export economy – rubber, tea, sugar – and imported Indian labor from nearby Tamil Nadu province to do the tapping, planting, and cutting. A tiny class of wealthy British planters and educated British civil servants became Ceylon's ruling caste, despite amounting to only minuscule numbers in the island of 4 million dwellers.

From a several-*years* perspective, the crisis of 1927 had emerged from recent governing blunders that had undermined the relative bucolic years of the Colebrook-Cameron system (1833-1920). The first sign of trouble came in 1907, when urban protests erupted demanding the introduction of elections and the appointment of more "unofficial members" (i.e. actual Ceylonese) to the Legislative Council. Additional seats were granted; elections were not. As in neighboring India, Ceylon became much more politicized during World War I. Riots in 1915 were followed, as in 1847, by a brief spell of

martial law and a quick return to constitutional rule. 1919 saw the establishment of the Ceylonese National Congress, mirroring the far-more famous Indian National Congress (i.e. Gandhi and Nehru's "Congress Party") next door. Unlike India's leading nationalist party, however, Ceylon's version of a Congress party was neither secular nor multiethnic in character. It was instead an organized expression of Ceylon's religiously Buddhist, ethnically Sinhala super-majority (circa 75-80% of the total population), which demographically dwarfed even Ceylon's largest ethnoreligious minority, Hindu Tamils (circa 10-15%).

The 1920s were Ceylon's decade of "constitutional advance," as the parlance of the time went. And herein lay, for most British and Tamil stakeholders, the very problem. 1920 saw Ceylonese "unofficials" gain a majority on the Legislative Council for the first time, and primarily by election rather than appointment. In this respect Ceylon was already a democratization trailblazer; no non-white-majority British colony yet had anything similar. Yet the franchise was still infinitesimal at 4%. Considering that the 1920s were generally seen as a time of deteriorating rather than improving governance in Ceylon, the momentum when the Donoughmore Commission was appointed in 1927 seemed to be on the side of reaction and retrenchment, not deepened democratic reform.

This deteriorating governance, pre-Donoughmore, was driven by confusion over who held ultimate authority. Appointed in 1924 after over a decade of service in Nigeria and Gold Coast (later Ghana), Sir Hugh Clifford would have a miserable brief eighteen-month stint from 1925-1927 as Governor-General of Ceylon. Steeped in British traditions of parliamentary sovereignty, Clifford felt honor-bound not to overrule the views of the Legislative Council, with its Ceylonese majority. He would act like a constitutionally appointed Prime Minister, not an absolutist King. Yet neither the British Colonial Office back in Whitehall nor the British planter and civil-servant populations in Ceylon had any interest in restrained British rule over their colonial subjects, or in having policy decided by Ceylonese rather than Brits. Nationalist sentiment was swelling, especially among the Sinhala majority and its rising elite. Increased authority and self-rule, if not yet independence, was more vocally being demanded. Clifford's government was paralyzed between the British and Tamil cries for retrenchment and the Sinhala and (in a more radical if far less numerous force) Indian cries for bold leaps toward increased local self-rule.

In mid-1927, Clifford resigned as Governor-General and the Donoughmore Commission was duly appointed. Dissatisfaction with the status quo was practically universal. Something had to give. But not necessarily the franchise. Critiques of Ceylon's strictly limited franchise, much less diagnoses of Ceylon's governance woes pinpointing the smallness of suffrage as their source, were practically nonexistent. There was no reason to expect that the franchise, specifically, was what was about to give. And not even in a reverse direction to restore the predictable, Crown Colony politics of the Colebrook-Cameron years, which British officialdom looked upon with such fondness, and which would have arguably been most consistent with British political development. When it came to the franchise, the Donoughmore Commission surprisingly decided to hit fast-forward rather than pause or reverse.

Enter the Commissioners

The assignment for the Commission was to clear up this confusion, not as judicial-style interpreters of the existing constitution, but as authors of an entirely new constitution. This meant that practically everything was on the table.

Of primary concern was the question of self-rule. Would the Commission reverse recent constitutional advances, and restore a British majority on the Legislative Council? Or would they continue progress toward self-rule by granting Ceylonese additional seats, thereby treating Ceylon much as Britain had recently (as of 1925) come to treat its white-dominated settler colonies, such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand? Relatedly, would Britain expand the number of elected seats and reduce the number of appointed seats on the Legislative Council, or return to a model less electoral and more heavily appointed? Just how prepared Ceylon already was for increased self-government was shaping up to be the primary controversy dividing local demands from British opinion.

Self-rule was not the only major controversy, however. Of similar importance was the dilemma of how to deal with Ceylon's challenges with ethnic division. As in many other colonies, Britain set aside a guaranteed number of legislative seats for ethnic minorities, to ensure that the ethnic majority – in Ceylon's case, the Buddhist Sinhalese majority – did not dominate the colony entirely. This meant separate electorates in which Sinhalese candidates would compete for Sinhalese seats and the major ethnic minority populations, especially Tamil Hindus, but also Muslims, mixed-race Burghers, and the upland Kandyan population, would compete for elected seats and secure a fixed number of appointed seats on a separate basis. Whether the Commission would continue the system of separate ethnic electorates, or establish territorial constituencies that mixed all ethnic groups together, represented another major question of interest.

A third major controversy surrounded the status of migratory Indian laborers. A classic plantation-dominated export-driven colonial economy, Ceylon depended on cheap workers from neighboring British India for much of its workforce. These workers had recently become organized into the Ceylonese Labour Union. Inspired by major political gains for organized labor in Britain itself in the 1920s, where a Labor government had come to power for the very first time, Indian workers in Ceylon were becoming increasingly politicized and demanding. The Sinhalese majority especially looked upon this itinerant Indian population with great trepidation, and wished to convince the Commission that Indians were undeserving of citizenship and voting rights. As A.E. Molamure, a leading politician in the Ceylon National Congress and future speaker of Sri Lanka's independent parliament put it in his public testimony before the Commission:

“I do not think it would be advisable to bring the Indians into the general electorate. You may increase the representation, but they are a people who come and go, they are birds of passage – 100,000 come this year and 150,000 go away and it is difficult to fix on a territorial electorate for them.... There are exceptions,

who remain to a large extent in one place itself, but they have that tendency, and if you bring them into the general electorate, you must safeguard yourselves by saying there is a residential qualification attached to it – they should have resided in that district a longer period than the others.”

The legal and political status of native-born Indians thus promised to consume much of the Commission’s energies during its investigatory visit to Ceylon as well.

Of only minor concern – compared with these burning controversies over self-rule, ethnic representation, and the citizenship status of migratory Indian laborers – was the question of the franchise. As everywhere else in the British Empire, suffrage in colonial Ceylon was extremely limited, due to strict property, literacy, age, and gender requirements. Only approximately 4% of Ceylon’s population enjoyed the right to vote. Since Ceylon’s governance problems in the 1920s were perceived to be related to questions of executive-legislative relations and the proper division of powers between, and not in any clear way to questions of the franchise, there was no reason to expect the Commission to treat the franchise as a major target for political reform.

The low salience of the franchise is eloquently expressed by the fact that expanding the franchise was not any constituency’s top priority. Most significantly, the group that stood to gain the most from an expedited path toward making elections the basis for who ruled – the Sinhalese-dominated Ceylon National Congress – was not pressing for an expansion of the franchise at all. As the Commission’s final report would eventually summarize: “It was a point of interest that the Ceylon National Congress – whose deputation included prominent Sinhalese members of the Legislative Council – while putting forward strong demands for full responsible government expressed themselves as desiring no extension of the present franchise.” Sinhalese politicians desperately wanted more legislative *seats*, but they were in no rush to compete for more *votes*.

As we shall soon see, although several constituencies expressed principled support for an expanded franchise, and a few (such as the Indian-dominated Ceylon Labour Union) even made a point of complaining about the limited franchise in their testimonies, in no instance was the franchise expressed as a witness’s most pressing concern; much less so was a priority placed on demanding universal suffrage. If anything, the franchise was a *non-issue*. The most influential actors on the Ceylon scene were neither making a big push for it or against it. All stakeholders’ attention was emphatically on a diverse set of other issues.

Suffrage as a Safeguard

How and why, then, did the Donoughmore Commission come to take such a dramatic step to introduce universal suffrage in Ceylon, well before the British had done so in any other non-settler colony, and well before any other empire in Asia had done the same?

The transcripts of the Donoughmore Commission’s lengthy discussions with hundreds of witnesses show that they reached it only very gradually. Most simply put, an

expanded franchise was eventually perceived as necessary to combat two ills in particular: 1) the vulnerability of a narrow electorate (again, only 4% of the total population) to intimidation and manipulation; and 2) the non-responsiveness of Ceylon's emerging Sinhalese political elite to the wider, non-voting local population.

What visibly troubled the commissioners most as they toured Ceylon was not the colony's muddled separation of powers, or its ethnic tensions, or its rising anti-British sentiment, though these were certainly the matters that troubled their interlocutors most. What troubled them most was the island's poverty, inequality, and parlous social services. The only solution they saw to this problem was making Ceylon's political elite electorally accountable to the vast majority of Ceylon's impoverished citizens. This concern was undoubtedly rooted in British paternalism rather than in any keenly felt affinity for Ceylon's poor, huddled masses. Yet the Commission spent much of its time and devoted much of its questioning to problems with public-goods provision in Ceylon. Sincere or performative, the Commission's deep focus on the material condition of Ceylon's population suggests that it was more of an issue than the size of the franchise.

A narrow electorate was too easy to intimidate, and a wider population with no voting rights was too easy to ignore. Bear in mind that even the 4% of Ceylonese who were able to pass both the property and literacy tests were by no means well-to-do. The risks of a broadened franchise were a calculated gamble to make, the Donoughmore Commission concluded, if they would improve the odds that Ceylon's indigenous elite might become more responsive to the pressing economic needs of the general population. And decrease the odds that citizens would be strong-armed into voting for local strongmen, regardless of their sincere preferences.

Reaching this conclusion involved a rethinking of what safeguards meant in the Ceylonese context. In the first stages of the testimonies, the Donoughmore Commission would run through the standard litany of potential safeguards with their witnesses. Was a property requirement necessary to ensure only "good men" could vote? Did the literacy test need to be maintained to ensure illiterate and uneducated Ceylonese did not get press-ganged into voting against their own interests for self-serving politicians? Was a literacy test even practicable, and should it be in English or in any commonly spoken language in Ceylon? At what level might the property requirement be set so as to include worthy voters while still excluding unworthy ones?

Safeguards the commissioners considered also included the typical battery of checks and constraints against popularly elected legislative majorities. Did Ceylon need an upper parliamentary chamber, akin to the House of Lords, to protect the colony from its elected legislators' impulsive decisions? Should the British governor-general maintain the right to veto any legislation he disfavored, even if the Legislative Council approved it by a supermajority?

What is remarkable is that, over the course of the Donoughmore Commission's stay in Ceylon, all of these classic safeguards became perceived as beside the point. None were necessary to safeguard Ceylon from the real danger on its path to self-rule; the danger that a narrow-minded, narrowly elected Ceylonese elite would gain new powers without

also being saddled with new responsibilities to attend to the massive welfare needs of Ceylon's general population.

In sum, majoritarian elections with full manhood suffrage were not a danger that needed to be safeguarded against; they became the safeguard themselves.

The Mental Path

Perhaps the best way to convey how radically the Commission's thinking evolved over the course of their time in Ceylon is with the following fact: in the first fifteen public testimonies, the size of the franchise did not come up a single time. Neither the Commissioners nor any of the witnesses, Ceylonese or British, suggested a shift in suffrage as a way to tackle Ceylon's governance woes.

It was only with the testimony of the acting solicitor-general and attorney-general, a Muslim Ceylonese judge named M.T. Akbar, that the smallness of the franchise was raised. Even in Akbar's testimony, the issue came up only belatedly and perhaps even serendipitously. In the early parts of his testimony, Akbar criticizes the quickness of constitutional reforms in Ceylon, positioning himself – alongside virtually all British and most other ethnic minority witnesses – as more temperamentally inclined toward retrenchment than reform. In the following vignette, Akbar expresses regret that the British have moved as far toward permitting self-rule as they have, and reports on the logic of local British officialdom in allowing Ceylonese a majority on the Legislative Council:

AKBAR: I had the good fortune of working under all these men, and we had to deal with the troublous [sic] times we had during the [1915] riots. I was with [former Attorney-General] Sir Henry Gollan, and when he was working the old Constitution he confided in me from time to time, and I remember before these new reforms were given there was only one elected Ceylonese seat, and there was an election also for the [mixed-race] Burghers and Europeans. Then you know that [British Foreign Secretary] Lord Grey, just after the war, and others became suddenly very generous, and Lord Grey gave a measure of reform which was never expected and [Secretary of State for the Colonies] Lord Milner and [Secretary of State for India] Mr. Montagu did the same in India also – there was a sudden fit of generosity after the war. At that time I was very distressed because, whether my inferences were right or wrong – I give them to you for what they are worth – I was very struck by the enormous privileges which were given and which I never expected would be given. We have the habit of asking far too much.

COMMISSIONER [LORD DONOUGHMORE]: That is not confined to the Orient.

AKBAR: Suddenly you found this very liberal Constitution given to us with only 14 Government officials in a Council of 37, and I protested to Sir Henry Gollan. I

said that we were given too much, and we were in for trouble. Then he told me ‘It cannot be helped; we must carry out orders.’ And I told him – this is very important – ‘Why do you take 14 Government officials and put them in Council and make them waste their time listening to all this talk?’ He said ‘Our idea is to work this scheme as well as we can, and it may be necessary to have these official votes for the carrying out of Government measures.’ I said ‘As a check why do you not give the Colonial Secretary 14 votes and be done with it?’ and he told me a thing that created a great impression on my mind.... He said ‘We want to take these official tin gods from their offices and take them to surroundings in which they can hear their work criticised’, and after a time he said ‘Do you see the remarkable change in Mr. Bowes, the Principal Collector of Customs?’ I said ‘Yes, he is absolutely human now.’”

This provides a helpful window into the core governance problem in 1920s Ceylon. With only 14 appointed seats out of 37 total seats on the Legislative Council, British councilors had been rendered as powerless as the loyal opposition in the British Parliament itself. Akbar reports that his predecessor as Attorney-General, Henry Gollan, saw the virtue in this system as one of holding British civil servants to account. The Ceylonese majority could now pressure British officers – Gollan’s “official tin gods” – into better bureaucratic behavior. As we will soon see, the logic of suffrage expansion would similarly center on the need to constrain the Sinhalese version of “tin gods”: their leading nationalist politicians.

The exchange also reveals that Judge Akbar is no liberal or reformer. The tenor of his remarks would lead one to expect his testimony to conclude with a call for greater retrenchment rather than quickened reform. This sense is enhanced even further when Akbar recalls his own role in adjudicating Ceylon’s 1915 race riots, and laments how the Sinhalese majority milked the situation to extract premature reforms and produce an unworkable constitution:

“During the riots I went through awful times; I was the first Crown Counsel to prosecute in the Island, and 9 people were sentenced to death at once. I told [Ceylon’s Chief Justice] Sir Anton Bertram I did not want to prosecute. I said I was a Mohammedan, and people may say the dispute was with the Sinhalese. There has been a lot of trouble over these riots and it has a great bearing on this question. The manner in which they were treated was too severe, and that was the cause that united these people together.... This unity deceived the home authorities. The riots were anti-Muslim, and the English Government backed the Muslims too strongly, and it threw the other groups into one solid mass. They won one or two over from the minority communities, so that they were able to put forward a united front which was brought about by circumstances rather than anything else.... It was the manner in which they were treated during the riots that induced them to ask for as much reform as possible. They were very lucky. [British Prime Minister] Mr. Lloyd George had made certain statements about the position; and these people were lucky in having great advocates on behalf of the Sinhalese case.... Their case was taken up, and I think a wrong impression was created in the minds of the authorities. It was my opinion that the reforms

given were far more than necessity required. They took advantage of the situation.... They came to a sort of understanding that they would work the Constitution until 1923, and then that the whole matter would be debated in the Legislative Council with a view to another batch of reforms. That is how they got the Constitution they have now. That is an impossible Constitution. There is no responsibility and the unofficials dominate the situation. Sir William Manning [Ceylon Governor-General, 1918-1925] and Sir Henry Gollan left our shores and left us to work it."

Akbar then volunteers his thoughts, unbidden, on elections and the franchise. In the following exchange, Akbar begins by criticizing Ceylon's immature electorate. Yet the conversation turns, by its end, into a brainstorming session about the possible benefits of expanding the franchise:

AKBAR: Another thing I want to mention. We must not look at the electorate as analogous to the English electorates. A man who wants to get a seat in Council does not go and address others and convince them of the wisdom of his group of principles. What he does is to get one or two agents to work and bring the whole crowd to him.

CHAIRMAN [LORD DONOUGHMORE]. That is very interesting.

A. It is absolutely the fact.

Q. Is it because the electorate is so small he is able to do that?

A. No, because the electorate do not appreciate the rights they have: they are not educated.

Q. They have not been employed sufficiently long as an electorate?

A. You may put it that way. It is a grave danger. Take the Muslim electorate: what Mr. [prominent Muslim businessman and legislator Mohamad Macan] Markar did was to get hold of the Priests, and he got them to work for him, and he came out on top. If you can get one or two influential men under you, whether by fair means or foul, you will get the seat....

Q. What is your remedy? Do you want a bigger electorate?

A. I think that would be a good thing, because then there will be no chance of political education going in the wrong direction.

DR. [DRUMMOND] SHIELDS: And that larger electorate would not be so easy to manipulate?

A. No.

CHAIRMAN: I do not know if it is convenient to interrupt your argument. It is very valuable to us; it is full of new sidelights.

The exchange is illuminating on many fronts. First, it begins between a conservative, reform-resistant judge and presumably the most conservative member of the Commission, its aristocratic, Tory commissioner. Second, Akbar raises the franchise for the first time before the Commission almost as an afterthought (“Another thing I want to mention.”). He is no spokesman for any pressure group. He comes from one of Ceylon’s tiniest minority groups and makes his living via appointment rather than by election or by popular appeal. Third, Akbar does not suggest expanding the franchise, but follows his own logic to do so when Lord Donoughmore proposes the idea. His starting point is not that the suffrage is too small, but that Ceylonese voters lack the maturity to use the franchise wisely. Fourth, we see one of the Labor members of the Commission, Sir Drummond Shiels, introduce the logic that a small electorate is easier than a large electorate for the local political elite to manipulate. This logic would play an overriding role in the testimonies to follow. Finally, Lord Donoughmore’s reactions to Judge Akbar’s comments on an expanded franchise strike a chord: “That is very interesting,” he responds at first. He concludes by calling Akbar’s remarks “very valuable to us; it is full of new sidelights.” For the remarks to be “valuable” suggests the possibility of prior Commission interest, as yet publicly unexpressed, in the virtue of an expanded franchise. To call Akbar’s suffrage comments “full of new sidelights” underscores the point that the franchise was effectively a non-issue until, in the sixteenth testimony the Donoughmore Commission had heard, Akbar brought it up – and in a critical vein, decrying voter immaturity.

Akbar’s testimony then departs from the matter of elections and returns to questions of the balance of power between the Ceylonese and British communities. Given Akbar’s role as a judge, his concern with matters of constitutional design rather than electoral institutions makes perfect sense. Yet the Commission – again led by its conservative head, Lord Donoughmore – pulls the conversation back to the possible benefits of elections, this time on the virtues of the secret ballot as an antidote to electoral corruption:

AKBAR: What I suggest is this. I think that the Legislative Council might be asked to elect, say, a panel of 15 members, or say 12; the Governor out of these 12 men might select 4 of them to have seats in the Legislative Council with portfolios, and the other 8 should be associated in twos with the four Ministers as a sort of Board....

CHAIRMAN: There is an interesting detail there. Why is it important, do you think, that a panel should be elected? Is it in order to ensure that they are men with a following in the Legislative Council?

A. That is one reason, but the real reason is to prevent suspicion. In the Orient suspicion is the great trouble.

DR. SHIELS: Is that election to be an open election or by ballot?

A. By ballot, so long as it is done in the open.

SIR GEOFFREY BUTLER: You prefer a ballot?

A. Yes.

Q. There is this to be said – it was put up by one witness or somebody I was talking to about it; he said that if it is going to be in secret, then it will be very easy for all these communal agencies to be effective; there will be a leak of that publicity which brings a certain amount of shame in a man. If taken by ballot it is easier....

DR. SHIELS: Before you finish your reply to that, might I suggest the very opposite, that if it is in open Council where the vote is known, it would be almost impossible for anyone to go against their community, whereas if it is a secret ballot, they may, knowing there is a better man of another community, give their vote conscientiously?

A. From my experience you would get more conscientious voting by ballot than in an open vote. You will find that that is what the whole country wants.

Again, Akbar is offering remedies for the muddled division of powers, and the Commission diverts his focus to questions of elections. Whereas the prior vignette showed the Commission beginning to draw the inference that a wider suffrage could help solve the problem of electoral manipulation (by the Sinhalese equivalent of the British “official tin gods”), this subsequent exchange raises the prospect that a secret ballot will help remedy the problem of electoral fraud and corruption. On this front, Akbar only feeds the Commission’s prejudices, remarking that “In the Orient, suspicion is the great trouble.”

The theme then shifts to a potential tyranny of the majority. Will making full-suffrage elections the main route to power in a divided society like Ceylon not simply usher in Sinhalese domination? Despite his status as a representative of one of Ceylon’s smallest ethnoreligious communities, Akbar suspects otherwise. His reasons why – educational uplift and popular constraint against elite abuse – would ultimately reflect much of the thinking in the Commission’s final report. Sticking with Akbar’s suggestion of creating an elected panel to serve as a kind of super-legislative body, Sir Drummond Shiels wonders if this will lead to abusive Sinhalese majority rule:

DR. SHIELS... Regarding the panel to be submitted by the House to the Governor for his selection, what do you say to the argument that the Sinhalese – and to a lesser extent the Tamils – would have a predominating say, and that such a panel would not be fairly representative of the composition of the House: would they not take advantage of their position?

AKBAR: Is it not the best way of training them up?

CHAIRMAN: I do see the argument the other way, but it may be an advantage for the whole 12 seats to be filled by Sinhalese because it is the germ of a party and constitutes the others an opposition at once?

A. It is not only that. When the whole panel is Sinhalese, they know the whole country is watching them, and they will do justice to the minorities.

In other words, Sinhalese elites might be socialized into being less abusive if they are granted more political power; both because of the experience of holding office, and because the more power they clearly hold, the easier it will be for voters to hold them to account to govern more wisely.

Akbar then offers a similar “uplift” logic regarding his own Muslim community. The idea is not that Ceylonese are already mature enough and prepared to exercise the powers of a full suffrage. To the contrary, Akbar’s idea – which the Commission will come to share – is that only electoral experience will solve this problem of immaturity. When the questioning shifts from the Sinhalese super-majority to his own Muslim super-minority, Akbar responds:

AKBAR: Political ideas are only just now beginning. They are so dense, they do not know what privileges they have. If you go into a Village you will find that the people are dense and know nothing. You can lead them. It is pitiful, and they have to be taught.

CHAIRMAN: Time and the exercise of political privileges are the only remedies?

A. Yes.

In sum, the testimony of Judge M.T. Akbar proves illuminating as a microcosm of the Donoughmore Commission testimonies more widely. Prior to his testimony, suffrage expansion was never publicly raised. Only after Akbar’s testimony does the size of the suffrage become a recurring theme, as we aim to show in future versions of this manuscript. Furthermore, the logics revealed in this testimony will also prove broadly reflective of the logics ultimately offered by the Donoughmore Commission for extending full manhood suffrage to the colony of Ceylon in its final report. Most simply put, elections with a full franchise will help uplift politically immature Ceylonese subjects and impose a popular constraint on the group British officials feared and distrusted most: the Sinhalese nationalist political elite, as it was mobilizing in the Ceylon National Congress. The great mass of Ceylon’s population were to serve as the constraints rather than the constrained.

Conclusion

Compared to the first and third waves of democratization, both happening in largely European and North American contexts, democracy’s second wave—taking place mostly

in the “third world” concurrently with decolonization—is less well understood. The conventional wisdom on the second wave is that mass bottom-up demand for democracy led to the expansion of the franchise (Huntington 1991, Lee and Paine 2023). This study shows the incompleteness of this view through analyzing the adoption of universal suffrage in Ceylon—the very first case of the second wave democratization and world’s first non-white democracy. Our analysis of the Donoughmore archives suggests that Ceylon’s democratization happened through British fiat as opposed to mass demand.

But the Donoughmore Commission did not go to Ceylon with suffrage expansion in mind. After all, Ceylon is not a white, settler colony and its population was highly impoverished and uneducated. The idea of suffrage expansion emerged only gradually as the Commission realized that suffrage might be used to contain Ceylon’s indigenous elites of the ethnic majority as opposed to empowering them—as the fear for the “tyranny of the majority” would predict. As nationalism swelled and “responsible government” (aka self-rule) began to seem inevitable in the British empire, British imperialists concluded that the second best option to British autocratic rule for its non-white colonies would be full electoral democracy, even without indigenous demand. To introduce self-rule and universal suffrage together would eventually become a model for democratization in non-white-majority British colonies, particularly after World War II, when decolonization seemed much more inevitable than during the interwar period.

There are generally two beliefs about the benefits of elections. The first is that elections are a vehicle that transmits voters’ private preferences into public choices. In this case, the quality of electoral outcomes depends on the quality of voters’ preferences. Thus safeguards such as literacy tests are necessary to prevent the tyranny of an uneducated, ill-informed majority. The second, neo-Tocquevillian view is that elections improve the voter’s political intelligence – learning by doing. In this case, voters’ current education level matters less as elections themselves are political education. This study shows how British thinking evolved to embrace the second, “uplift” logic, helping them justify the eventual decision to introduce universal manhood suffrage in its colonies.

Yet our analysis also suggests an additional, heretofore underappreciated pathway from suffrage skepticism to an embrace of universal suffrage. British commissioners remained wedded to a classic logic of safeguards and constraints, but their assessment of *who needed to be safeguarded from whom* shifted over the course of their months in Ceylon. The Ceylonese masses were ultimately entrusted to constrain Ceylonese elites rather than – in the more canonical pattern – the other way around. If this pattern can be shown to hold more broadly, it suggests a new way of thinking about how elite resistance to universal suffrage was overcome across the world throughout the 20th century.