

ABSTRACT

The introduction of Divorce legislation in 1931 aroused widespread controversy in Colonial Trinidad. This paper attempts at understanding the nature of that controversy which involved three major protagonists - the Colonial Government, the Pro-Divorcists, and the Anti-Divorcists led by the Catholic Church. Indeed, the introduction of this sensitive piece of social legislation provided an appropriate opportunity for an examination of the complex and inherently divisive society under Crown Colony rule.

The paper first focusses on the making of the issue. It is suggested that the controversy of 1931 was the culmination of a protracted debate which began in 1926.

The varied reactions to the proposed divorce legislation form the major concern of the paper. It is contended that the Colonial Government was able to introduce successfully the measure of social legislation on account of the inherently divisive nature of the society. The Government did not, at first, prevent the Anti-Divorcists from expressing their views on and agitating against the proposed legislation. The Anti-Divorcists, however, played into the hands of the Government. They were unable to effectively sustain a united opposition to the proposed legislation. The divorce issue gave rise to

effective divisions within the ranks of the allies of the Catholic Church. Ultimately, the opposition to Divorce became essentially Catholic in character. With the Government committed to the introduction of divorce legislation, it was impossible for the Church to be victorious, having only a third of the population as its adherents. The King was mightier than the Pope.

The divorce issue thus possessed a critical political dimension. The coming of divorce meant special legislation. The system of Crown Colony Government in Trinidad was to face its first major test since the introduction of reforms in 1924. It is contended that the Colonial Government used the Divorce issue to demonstrate the benefits of Crown Colony Government. Divorce legislation was seen as a progressive measure, one of the benefits of British rule. The Anti-Divorcists were portrayed as being reactionary. The King was thus set for a double victory over the Pope.

In the aftermath of the 1931 controversy, the antagonisms between the protagonists continued. The Pro-Catholic stance of the Anti-Divorcists remained strong and pervasive, ending in the inevitable failure of the Deputation to England. Possibly encouraged by their victory, the Pro-Divorcists became increasingly hostile to the Catholic Church.

The divorce controversy was essentially a struggle for the heart and mind of the Colonial society. The sceptre was to prove mightier than the crozier. The Pope was thus defeated by both the power of the King in the Legislative Council and by the complex and divisive colonial society.