

Report of Presentation by Derek Partridge CMG - "Sierra Leone : Will hope triumph over experience ?" 16/ 05/ 96

[Mr. Partridge was the British High Commissioner in Sierra Leone until 1991. Since his retirement he has taken a special interest in the welfare of Sierra Leone's people. He was invited to speak to the members of Warwick District One World Link and the United Nations Association on May 4, 1996 at the Manor House Hotel, Leamington Spa.]

He traced the history of Sierra Leone from its foundation as a freed slave colony and then a British Colony. He stressed the early tradition of educational excellence in Freetown, and later elsewhere in the country. Freetown was known at one time as the Athens of Africa. One of the first grammar schools for *girls* was founded in the late 19th century.

By the time Sierra Leone reached independence in 1961 the country had an educated and experienced elite ready to take over government. So what went wrong ?

[Mr Partridge then outlined the history of the country from 1961 until 1991, when the first UNDP index for Human Development put Sierra Leone at 165th out of 165 countries. The Prime Minister after Independence was Milton Margai, a good politician who unfortunately died after only three years. He was succeeded by his brother, who did not hold the people together and was perceived as anti-Crio. He was followed by Siaka Stevens, who believed in despotic rule and was corrupt. He squandered all Sierra Leone's assets in order to hold the 1980 OAU conference in Freetown. He caused a nosedive in the economy from which the country never recovered. (It was at this time that the first visit was made from Leamington Spa to initiate the One World Link with Bo.) In 1985 Stevens stepped down and manipulated J. Momoh (head of the army) into being President in 1986. He was a weak, indecisive leader who allowed ministers free rein to be corrupt.]

In 1991 Mr. Partridge thought the only answer was a revolution. Nevertheless, he gave a speech to the Bar Association of Sierra Leone and the members were inspired by his words to call for a democratic government with elements of Westminster and U.S. systems whereby the Executive would be separated from the Legislature and Ministers would not be able to sit in Parliament (thus giving less incentive for corrupt politics). Plans for a new constitution were made, but after a trip to Northern Korea in 1992 Momoh returned home to be toppled by a military coup when Strasser took over.

The NPRC government was set up and the members of the previous regime were imprisoned for a year and put under house arrest.... [Despite various abuses of human rights] the NPRC proved popular because they improved government standards, and rice, petrol and money from banks were once more available. Sadly, the lure of corruption was too much for the young leadership and they became thoroughly corrupt, although they managed to gain the confidence of the international community sufficient to secure an IMF structural adjustment package. This called for sound

economic policies, a reduction in corruption and a return to democratic government.

[By this time the security situation had deteriorated with Liberian soldiers occupying the Eastern and Southern provinces. Pressure built up from inside and outside to take firm action to restore security and there was pressure from foreign governments and from the people of Sierra Leone that a fair election be held. These took place in February of this year (1996). when Tejun Kabba was elected president. For the first time there are two women in the cabinet. Momodu Koroma, an old friend of the Link, was appointed Minister of Presidential Affairs and Public Service.]

The conclusion so far is that there is some hope but there are also possible pitfalls, as so far the rebels have not recognised the new government. However, the government itself appears to be sound and an Amnesty International official was recently given a warm welcome and encouraged to travel and see whatever she liked. There is tremendous optimism in the country at the moment and the defeated UNPP leader has said he will ensure a vigilant opposition....

What thereafter?

There have been many disappointments in the history of Sierra Leone and many opportunities missed. We can only hope now for a new dawn. Despite the apathy which has been a feature of the Sierra Leone character, they fought strongly for the election. The women....provide hope and it is up to all of us who care about the Sierra Leone people to support them as much as possible.

[The report is signed by Jane Knight.]