



The Role of Government in the Development of the Electricity Service in Barbados, 1911-1980

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Barbados has had a public electricity service since 1911, provided first by the Barbados Electric Supply Corporation and then its successor, the Barbados Light & Power Co., Ltd. Such a service, starting in the island's capital city, Bridgetown, and moving into the rural areas, has been central to the country's development. In this essay I argue that government played a key role in the development of the service, first as facilitator through legislation in the period up to 1950. Then, with the coming of ministerial government and independence, government, in an effort to push its modernization program, placed pressure on the electricity provider to expand its operations and invested in the company. This expansion paved the way for the provision of a sound electricity infrastructure which secured the successful diversification of the island's economy and the transformation of the society.

Barbados is an island of 166 square miles, located east of the Caribbean archipelago. It has been an independent nation since 1966, having gained independence from Britain in a phased process of self-government. In the period after independence the island made significant strides, and in 1999, it was ranked twenty-ninth on the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) human development index, higher than any other in the Caribbean or Latin America. Economist Andrew Downes has explained this performance in terms of good management, political stability, social harmony, and the development of the infrastructure.¹

¹ Andrew Downes, "Analysis of Economic and Social Development in Barbados: A Model for Small Island Developing States," United Nations Economic

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URL: <http://www.thebhc.org/publications/BEHonline/2012/carter.pdf>

However, not enough attention has been given to the electricity infrastructure and the role government has played in facilitating the electric provider, the Barbados Electric Supply Corporation and its successor, the Barbados Light & Power Co., Ltd. Indeed, the development of an electricity service is almost taken for granted. This essay analyzes the role of government in the development of the electricity service between 1911 and 1980. It is argued that in the first half of the twentieth century, government interpreted its role as facilitator, providing the legislative framework and the encouragement for the company to operate. However, with the coming of independence, government intensified its commitment to the company, as it saw itself as a leader, dictating the direction in which the company should go and how fast. Moreover, it is argued that this assistance laid the foundation for a strong and reliable electricity infrastructure, which in turn facilitated the expansion and diversification of the economy and fostered social development.

The coming of electricity service in Barbados cannot be explained without reference to the efforts of the planter-government in place at the time, and naturally invites some discussion on why the government embraced the electricity company in the first place. The writings of several Caribbean scholars help us to understand the complexities of the relationship between government and the operation of private corporations in the Caribbean context. In welcoming such a new company and technology to the island, the planter-government, which had been slow in introducing changes to the main economic engine the sugar industry, had taken a bold step. Woodville Marshall argues that the government had showed evidence of backwardness, as it clung to old technologies in the operation of the sugar industry.²

Thus it is rather surprising that the government would have entertained the new technology. This apparent ambivalence can be explained by the fact that the physical improvements in the sugar industry demanded capital and enterprise, with the former in short supply. However, electricity generation merely involved embracing a British investor.

Perhaps the answer lies in the changing nature of political power within the ruling elite. Cecilia Karch has shown that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bridgetown merchants were slowly moving into positions of prominence, especially in the House of Assembly.³ The

Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (2001). URL: <http://www.eclac.org/publicaciones/xml/2/7812/Go652.html>.

² Woodville Marshall, "Nineteenth Century Crisis in the Barbadian Sugar Industry," in *Emancipation II: Aspects of the Post-Slavery Experience in Barbados—A Series of Lectures to Commemorate the 150th Anniversary of Emancipation*, ed. W. K. Marshall (Bridgetown, Barbados, 1987), 93.

merchants, rather than the planters, were the driving force in encouraging a new company to commence operations. Merchants had their establishments in Bridgetown, and many of them resided in or near the town. The merchants stood more to benefit from electricity than the planters, who lived in the rural areas and had their businesses located there. Thus the notion of “backwardness” raised by Marshall with respect to the sugar industry is not applicable to the growing merchant class, who saw the benefits of lighting to their establishments.

By the 1950s, the merchants were no longer in control of the government, but the new black middle class–led governments showed even greater interest in urging the electricity service provider to expand service. Both Hilary Beckles and Hilbourne Watson have pointed to the close relationship between government and the corporate community. Writing in the context of a social debate in the 1980s known as the Mutual Affair, Watson argued that both political parties (Barbados Labour Party and the Democratic Labour Party) had entered into “a social compact with them giving them a monopoly over the formulation of government policy.”⁴ Beckles also made the point that:

Since 1951, when Adult Suffrage was achieved, labour government, elected mostly by blacks, administered totally by blacks, have found it necessary to pander to their “interest groups”, to the extent that these groups now perceive their interests and the national interests as one and the same. They constitute, furthermore, a silent and hidden force that successfully manipulates elements of the political directorate to its own end.⁵

The evidence suggests that the close relationship began during the colonial epoch and continued into the post-independence era. Economist Paul L. Chen Young, writing in the 1970s, argued that in Barbados there was a reasonably good relationship between private and public sectors.⁶ Unlike the governments of Cuba, Guyana, and Jamaica, which resorted to a program of economic nationalism in the 1970s, Barbados sought to work closely with the both local and private foreign establishments.

The Watson and Beckles analysis concerning the influence wielded by “corporate power” provides the theoretical framework for the examination of the relationship between government and the electricity provider. Though the provider was a British-headquartered company, it drew its

³ See Cecilia A. Karch, “The Transformation and Consolidation of the Corporate Plantation Economy in Barbados” (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1979).

⁴ Hilbourne Watson, “Beyond Ideology: The Question of the Black Middle Class in Barbados,” *Bulletin of Eastern Caribbean Affairs* 15 (Jan./Feb. 1990): 16-31.

⁵ Hilary Beckles, *Corporate Power in Barbados: The Mutual Affair: Economic Justice in a Political Democracy* (Bridgetown, Barbados, 1989), 19-20.

⁶ Paul L. Chen Young, *Report on Private Investment in the Caribbean* (Kingston, Jamaica, 1973), 26.

advisory team from the local business interests and directed the affairs of the company as they saw fit. The position of the two writers helps us to understand, as we shall see later, how an individual such as Sir Kenneth Hunte, a local entrepreneur, could use his position of prominence to influence the final the decision on the question of a nuclear power plant in 1960.

Although government sought a cordial relationship with the power provider, the evidence suggests that the company did not have its own way throughout the period. Rather, government used this relationship to put forward its national agenda for power. This had the effect of pressuring the company to expand its operations because of the importance of the service to the success of government's social and economic program. This notion of government influence on the electricity provider modifies the view expressed by social commentators that the provider became a "runaway" or uncontrolled monopoly that operated without regard to the national interests.

With government's verbal prodding and some financial backing, the company moved to expand its plant capacity and electricity coverage in the island. From the company's perspective, compliance with government's dictates did not lead to any major problems, as the expansion urged upon it also brought benefits to company as well as country.

Such national benefits have not been fully analyzed by economists and historians who seek an explanation to Barbados' remarkable progress from a poverty-stricken colony in the 1920s to a nation that had reached high levels of development by the 1980s. Growth and development have been explained with reference to economic transformation and human capital, more than to energy. But this point was not missed by the American anthropologists George Gmelch and Sharon Bolin Gmelch, who visited Barbados in the 1980s and conducted a micro study of the St. Lucy Parish. Their work shows how the coming of electricity to the rural villages transformed the lives of the people there, setting in train the use of electric radios, television sets, refrigerators, water heaters, and electric irons.⁷ Moreover, the transformation of the island's sugar-based economy to a service-based economy would not have been possible without a sound electricity infrastructure.

When the principals of the British-based company Barbados Electric Supply Corporation laid the foundations for a power plant in Barbados in 1910, they were doing so within the context of a colonial government under the ambit of a metropolitan government. The British had colonized the island since 1627, but within this metropolitan control, the English colonists had carved out for themselves representative institutions. From the seventeenth century to the 1950s, they managed the country's affairs

⁷ George Gmelch and Sharon Bolin Gmelch, *The Parish Behind God's Back: The Changing Culture of Rural Barbados* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1997), 129.

and were responsible for the introduction of the plantation system, white indentureship, enslavement, and free labor after 1838.

In the mid-nineteenth century there was a struggle between the sugar planting elite and the British government for the control of the management of the affairs of the colony, with the British government moving toward the direction of greater control. In most Caribbean colonies during this period, the old elected legislatures were abolished in favor of direct rule from the Crown, but in Barbados the sugar elite clung to the representative system. To appease the British government, the sugar elite accepted a compromise that allowed for an Executive Committee, whereby the Governor (British representative) assumed some control of the implementation of government policy. But for the most part Parliament, controlled by the colonists, continued to introduce measures to govern the country.

By 1900, descendants of the early colonists who had established themselves as the leading planters and merchants were still very much in control of the governmental machinery. It is clear that the government did not hesitate to give permission to British companies desirous of establishing businesses in the country. Several reasons explain this accommodation. Those who controlled the reins of government in the first half of the twentieth century still looked to Britain as the main trading partner and welcomed any new investment, particularly that which would contribute toward the development of their enterprises. In addition, since many merchants still lived in Bridgetown, they were keen to accept projects that would modernize the city.

Thus in the 1870s, Bridgetown served as a station for the West India & Panama Telegraph Company, and in 1885 the headquarters of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company were established in Bridgetown. A few years after the telephone was introduced, Barbados acquired its first telephone infrastructure. Moreover, British-led companies such as the Gas Company, the Railway Company, and the Water Supply Company also operated in the island.⁸

Government was mindful to create the legislative framework within which the electricity provider would operate. Barbados, even though a colony of Britain in 1911, had always prided itself on having a long history of parliamentary government, and parliamentarians sought to place the operations of would-be suppliers into a legislative framework. Thus several years before the London-based company Barbados Electric Supply Corporation (BESC) was formed, a legal framework had been established. The first relevant piece of legislation that passed the floor of Parliament was in 1899. This was "An Act to regulate the supply and use of electricity

⁸Anthony Dev Phillips, *Modernizing Barbados, 1880-1914* (Bridgetown, Barbados, 1996), 18.

for lighting and other purposes.” The legislation mandated the suppliers to provide electricity without giving any particular favor to a person or company. It mandated the suppliers to “make such charges for the supply of electricity as may be agreed upon, not exceeding the limits of price.” Thus the initial legislation addressed issues relating to price of the service and fairness of the supply.

However, Barbados had to wait until 1907 when the British company Anglo-American Debentures Corporation expressed an interest in supplying electricity. But the company requested further legislation. This led to the passage of another act, the Electric Power Act of 1907. That legislation established fixed rates under which the company would operate. For instance, for 10 units the charge was \$3.00, and for each additional unit over 10 units, the charge was 30 cents.⁹ The same piece of legislation gave the Barbados Electric Supply Corporation (BESC), established in 1909, the exclusive right to supply electricity in Bridgetown, the island’s capital city, and the surrounding areas within a radius of five miles.

When that company began operations in June 1911, it received its blessing from the local colonial government. The governor’s wife, Lady Leslie Probyn, who was responsible for the development of a recreational space known as Queen’s Park, was on hand to “throw the switch” marking the commencement of the service. In addition, one of Bridgetown’s leading merchants and Member of Parliament, J. O. Wright, welcomed the new venture, noting that it was the “first of its kind in the West Indies.”¹⁰ Wright acknowledged that in the past Barbadians had been critical of public projects, but praised the company for the huge strides it had made in bringing electricity to Bridgetown and its immediate environs. Wright’s backing for the new service was important, because many in the society were skeptical about it, citing safety concerns, and were therefore unwilling to give permission to place poles and substations on their property.

Two parliamentarians, J. O. Wright and W. K Chandler, agreed to serve on the company’s local advisory committee. Thus from the outset, the key persons within government embraced the electric company and gave support to its operations.

Why did the merchant and planter community support this venture? The merchants were more inclined to support the electricity venture than the planters, because their wholesale and retail operations were located in or around the city. Moreover, the city and the suburbs were prime residential areas. As a group that was well represented in Parliament, the merchants stood to benefit more than any other group and gave their support to the new company. They probably saw its beneficial role in their

⁹ The legislation defined the unit as the “energy contained in 1,000 amperes flowing under an electromotive force of one volt during one hour.”

¹⁰ Henderson Carter, *Powering our Nation’s Progress: The Story of Electricity Service in Barbados, 1911-2011*. (Bridgetown, Barbados, 2011), 43.

merchant houses. In fact, soon after 1911, merchants such as S. P. Musson & Sons and DaCosta and Company installed electrically powered cranes, which assisted with the loading of sugar from their warehouses on to lighters on the wharf for export. Other merchants used the opportunity to install fans.¹¹ The sugar planters, on the other hand, generally lived on their properties in the rural areas and came into the city mainly for business. Improvements in the town were not their first priority, but some of them in the legislature did not object to such improvements.

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, the BESC benefited from a number of government contracts. In 1911, the electricity company was asked to provide illumination for the city to celebrate the Coronation of King George V; this also occurred in 1936 and in May 1937 with the coronation of King George VI. Government also became a consumer when it supplied public lighting to the wharves and inner basin of the Careenage inlet.¹²

In 1936, with the electricity company well established, it applied to government to broaden its coverage throughout the country and was allowed to extend its lines beyond the 5-mile radius. The town had been fairly well served, and an effort was being made to take the service into the outlying areas of the country, where many upper and middle-class people resided. The 1936 Electricity Act also required all new or upgraded electrical installations to be certified by the government's electrical engineer before connection. Such inspections raised the level of safety and stemmed the flow of untrained persons conducting the wiring of homes.¹³

But the labor rebellion in Barbados of July 1937 and the resultant recommendations by two commissions gave impetus to the move to reach the rural consumers. The rebellion had occurred as a result of poor living and working conditions throughout the country and the rise of political consciousness among the masses. Much property had been destroyed, lives were threatened, and over twenty-two people were killed. As testimony to the government's support of the operations of the electricity provider, the governor gave orders for the protection of the utilities, mandating that the power plant of the Barbados Electric Supply Corporation was well guarded by the Volunteer Force.¹⁴ The local commission and the royal commission that investigated the event recommended an expansion of the economy to reduce unemployment and to raise the standard of living for Barbadians.

Pressure for an improvement of the electricity service also came from another source, the middle-class politicians in the House of Assembly. Radical politicians castigated the government for the performance of the

¹¹ Carter, *Powering Our Nation's Progress*, 51.

¹² *Ibid.*, 40.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

electricity company. Wynter Crawford, Member of Parliament for the parish of St. Philip and editor of a newspaper called the *Barbados Observer*, lambasted the utility company for its high rates, alleging that the company was overcharging. It was Crawford who pressed an early call for public utilities to be controlled by government. In June 1942, he posed two searching questions for the government on the floor of the House of Assembly:

Is the Government aware of the general and intense dissatisfaction on the part of the public over the recent increase in the cost of electric rates in the island? Will the Government appoint a commission to enquire into and report on the workings and profits made by the public utility known as the Barbados Electric Supply Corporation?¹⁵

In his reply to Crawford, Member of the government W. W. Reece noted that “no representation of dissatisfaction had been made to the Government” and that the Government had “no power to appoint a commission for that purpose.” But this response did not stem the criticism. Another Member of Parliament, J. T. C. Ramsay, backed Crawford’s call for a commission of enquiry and went further to raise the idea that government should purchase an “electrical apparatus to generate its own current.”¹⁰

Grantley Adams, who would later become premier of the island in 1958, raised the idea of the nationalization of the power company, arguing that he saw “no reason why we should not take over the Electric Company and use electricity to generate our own energy.”¹⁶ Thus a determined bid was made to push into the country to supply a greater number of consumers. However, the company experienced significant problems with its diesel engines in 1947 and 1948. According to one of the employees, Kenneth Blackman,

I remember we had such bad days when engine number 7 wasn’t really functioning, we had to shed power through the day and the night. It was like hell. I used to work eighteen hours a day. My job would start at 5 a.m. and finish at midnight. We didn’t have enough engines to take the load at the time.¹⁷

Blackman explained that to remedy the situation the power company embarked on a power rationing exercise. He noted that “at eleven each morning I would go down to the Bay Mansion to take out Bridgetown. People knew not to go into an elevator at 10:50.”¹⁸

Thus having served for over forty years on the Barbadian landscape, the company was still not in a position to supply adequate power to

¹⁵ Minutes of the House of Assembly, June 1942.

¹⁶ Minutes of the House of Assembly, 5 May 1942.

¹⁷ *Electrazine* 2, no. 2 (1986): 20.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Bridgetown. This inadequacy would attract the attention of the government in the 1950s.

After the conclusion of the First World War, the state apparatus began to change. While still under British rule, some blacks in Parliament were demanding self-government. This led to greater responsibilities being given to the Parliamentarians, who began to carry out roles as cabinet ministers. By 1950, the elective franchise was extended; the old property and income qualifications were abolished, and universal adult suffrage was introduced. For the first time in the history of the island, therefore, all persons over the age of 21, irrespective of race, income, or educational qualifications, voted. With over 90 percent of the population Afro-Barbadian, many of them voted for Afro-Barbadian candidates, a move that totally displaced the old white planter-merchant elite, who had occupied positions in Parliament since the 1640s.

Another significant development within the state apparatus was the move to a system where a premier was given responsibility for the management of a cabinet, whereby he introduced measures for the development of the country. The governor remained in place, representing Britain, but with fewer responsibilities for the development of the island.

The state went a bit further to establish a system of regulation in the 1950s. Under pressure from radical politicians such as Wynter Crawford and Grantley Adams, a one-man commission recommended the creation of a regulatory body to determine rates and charges. In fact, the regulatory body, the Public Utilities Board, was to be given the remit to review the rates of all public utilities on the island. This appealed the nationalists to some extent, as it appeared that the board would look after the wishes of consumers in a fair manner.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the BESC provided electricity to Barbadians using its financial resources. But with an ever increasing demand for service, the company came under pressure to serve both commercial and residential customers. Problems continued into the early 1950s, leading to calls from the prominent politician Grantley Adams for the nationalization of the power company. Instead, the decision was taken in 1955 to reorganize and re-capitalize the entity. The Barbados Electric Supply Corporation became the Barbados Light and Power Company (BL&P).

The fortunes of the new company did not immediately improve, however, and government explored the idea of establishing a nuclear power plant on the island. Mencea Cox, Minister of Trade, Industry and Labour, raised the idea of installing a nuclear power plant on the island in order to expand the electricity infrastructure. Cox's main concern was that the sole electricity provider, which had been supplying power since 1911, was not moving fast enough. The *Barbados Advocate* quoted Cox on the issue: "It is regrettable that although the Barbados Light and Power Company was established in this island for so many years, not even the metropolitan area in which the plant is installed is yet completely covered

by electric power.” Cox noted that it was his “desire to do anything possible to see that electricity is available for all the people of this island at as early a date as possible.”¹⁹ Minister Cox insisted on a nuclear plant because, as he saw it, the lone electricity provider served only approximately 17,000 of the 41,000 homes in the island.

According to an *Advocate* report, Dr. Hugh Gordon Cummins, premier of Barbados, met with Bruce “Bud” Mitchell, director of Mitchell Engineering’s Nuclear Division.²⁰ In September 1959, the *Barbados Advocate* reported that the Cabinet had “agreed to explore the matter further and wrote Mitchell, inviting him to come to Barbados for further discussions.”²¹

On October 15, government officials held talks with Bruce Mitchell and his associate, F. Rankin Weisgerber, president of the St. Clair Engineering Company of Detroit, Michigan. Mitchell explained that it could cost between \$3-6 million to install the plant and that “Barbados is ideal for an atomic reactor power station.”²²

Two plans were discussed. The first was for Mitchell Engineering to build the plant and supply the island for fifteen years, after which government would take over the plant. The second was for government “to pay for the Station and control it from the outset.”²³

There was some support for the venture, coming from a Barbadian named Luther Miller, who congratulated Mencea Cox for “his militant search for a new low priced electrical power.” Miller opined that the nuclear plant would reduce the price of electricity to the consumer and would “boost industrial development.”²⁴

Sir Kenneth Hunte, director of the electricity company, raised his voice in opposition to the establishment of a nuclear power plant, noting that Barbados was too small for the station. Sir Kenneth contended that it would cost the government approximately BDS \$15 million, a considerable expense that was practical only through large loans. He further noted that there would be a problem in disposing of the radioactive waste. Sir Kenneth assured Barbadians that the BL&P would soon offer ordinary shares to the public, because the company wanted to extend electricity throughout the countryside.²⁵

In April 1960, with the island facing the prospect of two power companies, a settlement was reached when Barbados Light & Power, led by Sir Kenneth Hunte and Sir Archibald Cuke, prominent members of the

¹⁹ *Barbados Advocate*, 19 Aug. 1959, p. 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 26 Aug. 1959, p. 1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 9 Sept. 1959, p. 1.

²² *Ibid.*, 15 Oct. 1959, p. 1.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Letter to the Editor, 27 Aug. 1959, p. 4.

²⁵ *Barbados Advocate*, 9 Aug. 1959, p. 9.

BL&P board, agreed to sell 645,576 ordinary shares to Mitchell Engineering at \$3.50 per share, gaining a controlling interest in the company.²⁶

We do not know all the details of the deal; but what is certain was that the BL&P was short of capital to expand its works, and with Mitchell Engineering and government seriously exploring the possibility of establishing a nuclear plant, which might have threatened the existence of BL&P, an offer might have been made to Mitchell Engineering. This deal might not have been detrimental to government's program, since Mitchell Engineering promised that it would speed up the extension program, using the existing plant. Thus the idea of a nuclear station was dropped. Government was not necessarily a loser in this case, for it had brought pressure on the existing power company to do something about its modest electrical infrastructure. However, the nuclear debate and the prominent role of Sir Kenneth Hunte in the discussions with Mitchell Engineering show how local power brokers could influence issues of national import.

In 1961, there was a change in the administration, and the newly formed Democratic Labour Party government under the leadership of Errol Barrow came into office. At the dawn of independence in 1966, Gordon Lewis observed an urgent quest of the Errol Barrow government. He noted that the

main concern of the Barrow modernizing elite has been their effort to strike a new note of urgency against Barbadian complacency. Basically, they seek to create a revitalized infrastructure necessary for economic growth, a task traditionally neglected by the usual United Kingdom programs more concerned with social welfare purposes than with new productive projects.²⁷

It was this modernizing platform that Premier Errol Barrow used when he won at the polls in 1961. Barrow produced a development plan for the country, outlining the projects to be implemented by his administration. Much of that plan was based on the adoption of a position to diversify the economy of the country, which for three hundred years had been centered on the production of sugar and its by-products rum and molasses.

Driving Government Policy

The aggressive stance of the government was not merely taken to support an ailing company. Rather, it aimed at securing government's interest in its economic diversification program and its bid for social and economic betterment for the working people. Government was influenced to a large degree by the long-serving and progressive Member of Parliament, Wynter Crawford, who led a tireless campaign in the Assembly in the 1940s for the

²⁶ Ibid., 29 April 1960, p. 1.

²⁷ Gordon Lewis, "Barbados and the New Look," *New World* 3, nos. 1 and 2 (1966): 25.

establishment of light industries to reduce the country's high food import bill. Crawford tells us in his autobiography that that he obtained a copy of Puerto Rico's industrialization program, Operation Bootstrap. Moreover, he had traveled widely throughout the Caribbean and North America, noting the progress toward industrialization. Crawford later became the Minister of Trade and Industry under the Barrow administration, and it was during the period 1961 to 1965 that much of the island's industrial policy was established.

Both Crawford and Barrow recognized that any industrial development would have to be mounted on an energy platform that was robust and reliable. Moreover, such an energy supply would enhance developments in other spheres and contribute toward social and economic betterment for the people. In this regard, the political directorate felt that government could not stand idly by and allow the power company to move at its own pace of expansion.

The diversification program had three core elements: the expansion of light manufacturing and tourism and the introduction of the offshore sector. Premier Barrow and his cabinet recognized that all of these initiatives demanded a robust electricity system, one that was able to meet the high energy demand of hotels and manufacturing plants, offering a reliable and consistent service. In addition to economic diversification, the Barrow administration had also adopted a policy of rapid rural electrification, aimed at extending the electric grid to the countryside, which had developed the reputation of being dark and desolate during the night.

In the period before 1961, the state had facilitated the Barbados Electric Supply Corporation and its successor the Barbados Light & Power Co., Ltd., through legislative enactments to ensure the smooth operation of the utility. However, from the 1960s onward and with the coming of independence in 1966, government worked closely with the electricity provider because the success of Barrow's program depended to a large extent on the capacity of the provider.

In the period after independence in 1966, as government rolled out its plan for economic development, several manufacturing companies established operations (see Table 1). These manufacturing companies needed to be served with a robust electricity grid. Thus government and the electricity provider worked closely together to determine how new private sector and government projects would be serviced. The power company responded to this new surge in manufacturing by purchasing 5.5 acres of land at Spring Garden in 1965. This land was cleared soon afterward, and construction began without delay. By 1967, the new plant, with five diesel sets and a total capacity of 11,500 kW came on stream, boosting the national capacity to 30,000 kW. Two more diesel sets, with a capacity of 4,500 kW each were added in 1969, and two years later there was further expansion with two additional engines being installed. Thus by 1971, the total capacity of BL&P was 48,230 kW or 60 percent above the

Table 1 Manufacturing Establishments in Barbados, 1966-1975

1966 Acme Engineering, Trowel Plastics Ltd L.G Miller and Sons Pine Hill Dairy	1970 Barbados Packaging Industries
1967 Star Products	1971 Moore Paragon
1969 Hooper Garment Factory Tansitor Electronics Ready Mix Ltd. Vita Foam	1974 Solar Dynamics
	1975 Cot Printery

Source: Barbados Industrial Development Corporation, *A Path to Progress: Celebrating 50 years of Industrial Development in Barbados, 1956 -2006* (St. Thomas, Barbados, 2007), 11-14.

peak demand of 30,100 kW. Two years later, with national electricity demand increasing by 15 percent each year, BL&P expanded its Spring Garden plant to install a Curtis Wright gas turbine with the capacity of 18,630 kW.²⁸ To complement this increased capacity, the BL&P undertook the necessary reconstruction of the substations. It also added a new substation at Haggatt Hall, St. Michael, with a capacity of 13,333 kW in 1972 and, in 1973, another substation was commissioned in St. Philip to serve the parishes of St. John, St. Philip, and Christ Church. This benefited the airport, the Barbados Water Authority's pumping stations, and the irrigation works of small farmers.²⁹

As Barrow established himself as prime minister, he announced that "all people living in the country subject to the same taxation" should have the benefit of the utilities.³⁰ To fulfill this promise, the Barrow administration embarked on a vigorous policy of street lighting in 1970. In 1971, the parish of Christ Church received street lighting for the first time, and in 1972 approximately 1,500 street lights were installed in several St. Michael communities.

The pace of the street lighting program was halted by the oil crisis of the early 1970s, and government was forced to switch off 757 street lights in an effort to conserve energy. However, as a show of government's commitment to the street lighting program, it paid BL&P \$1,044 per

²⁸ Carter, *Powering Our Nation's Progress*, 123-24.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 125.

³⁰ *Barbados Advocate*, 21 June 1970.

month to service the lights. In addition, government and BL&P worked together to deal with the oil crisis.³¹

When the Errol Barrow–led government left office in 1976, having been defeated at the polls, the close relationship between the government and the BL&P continued. Aably led by “Tom” Adams, the Barbados Labour Party linked the company’s expansion to national development. Cognizant of the need to further boost industrial activity, the Adams government registered its commitment to the national development program by purchasing 300,000 ordinary shares in BL&P in 1977 through the government-owned National Insurance Scheme (NIS). Created in 1962 by the Errol Barrow government to provide financial resources for retired contributors to the Scheme, the NIS investment injected more capital into BL&P, which was used for plant expansion and main construction. Table 2, showing the electricity needs of major government and private-sector projects, illustrates that BL&P was well aware of the emerging electricity needs and planned for such projects.

Table 2 Electricity Needs for Major Projects, 1978
(kW)

Port Expansion:	700
Flour Mill:	1,500
Airport Extension:	1,000
Intel:	2,220
Sewage Project:	1,000
Water Works Pumping:	300
Cheapside Post Office:	500
Heywoods Project:	750
Rockley Project:	600
Sandy Beach	300
St. James Beach Club:	250

Source: The Barbados Light & Power Company Limited, *Annual Report*, 1978.

The Adams-led government also announced in 1980 that it would pay for the installation of 800 new street lights, continuing the street lighting program started in the 1970s. Furthermore, in 1981, the government guaranteed a loan of US \$6 million to be borrowed by BL&P from the World Bank.³²

³¹ *Ibid.*, 28 May 1974.

³² *Ibid.*, 11 Feb. 1981.

The establishment of a sound and reliable electricity infrastructure paved the way for the growth and expansion of the hotel infrastructure. Large hotels had special demands that had to be met. The power grid had to be robust enough to carry the hotels, which used large amounts of electricity for interior and exterior lighting and air-conditioning.

The policy to boost the electric grid also had a positive impact on the manufacturing sector, which simply could not exist without an electricity supply. While government had embarked on a policy of “industrialization by invitation” by offering generous tax- and duty-free concessions to foreign enterprises, it is clear that the enterprises would not have come without a reliable power source. Thus companies such as Intel and Tansitor Electronics established themselves in the country, and manufacturing enterprises located in Newton, Grazettes, Wildey, and the Harbour Industrial Parks were well served by the power provider. As more industries moved into the parish of Christ Church, and with the expansion of the Grantley Adams International Airport, BL&P established a small power plant at Sewell to service that area.

The rural electrification program was critical to the government’s constant pledge to improve the standard of living of the people, particularly around General Elections. As early as the 1940s, BL&P had pushed its lines far beyond the city limits, into St. James, St. Peter, St. George, St. John, St. Joseph, and St. Philip parishes. But these power lines ran principally along main roads. This meant that only those living close to the main highways would obtain power. There were hundreds of villages and tenancies, located far from the main road, that remained untouched by electricity in the 1950s and the 1960s.

Government’s response to this was a comprehensive street lighting program, first on the main roads and then into the villages. But the policy did not end there. In order for the actual installation to be done for householders, houses had to be properly wired. In the 1970s, the company introduced a policy known as the assisted wiring scheme, undertaking to bear the cost of wiring houses for customers and allowing them to repay in installments. This policy increased the number of homes being supplied with electricity, thereby transforming the villages and the lives of the occupants.

By 1980, then, thanks mainly to government’s support for the sole electricity provider, much of the electricity infrastructure had been put in place in the country. This helped to service the demands of a rapidly expanding manufacturing sector and gave encouragement to other prospective manufacturers to establish plants. For the tourism sector, it enhanced the Barbados product, and for the aesthetics of the country, dark areas were transformed into well-lit communities. This occurred because the government saw its role as more than a legislative facilitator, but as an agency that would provide direction for and investment into the electricity provider in order to obtain national development.