

Opposition to indentured immigration in Trinidad (1845-1917)*

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In the early formative years of the immigration system the Anti-Slavery Society opposed the whole project on the grounds that abuses reminiscent of the slave trade would inevitably arise, and that it was in any case unfair to the former slaves to import labourers to compete with them. A few Trinidadian voices echoed these views and when arrangements to import Indians were first being made in 1844 some dissenting missionaries engineered a memorial against it, and in particular against any contribution to its cost from general taxation. They described the first Immigration Loan Ordinance as “hasty and vicious legislation enacted by planters against labourers”². Subsequently the arrival of the first Indians in 1845 was followed within two months by a petition to the governor against the new immigration policy with 41 signatures. This protest was led by Thomas Hinde, a coloured schoolteacher and landowner, and the leading coloured politician of the day. His followers were likewise from the coloured middle classes. They argued that the cost of immigration would involve increased taxation, while at a time of falling sugar prices the Immigration and Agricultural Society was recommending cuts in salaries and wages for estate employees. The combination of higher taxes and lower incomes would mean that fewer “respectable” free immigrants would come to Trinidad from the nearby Caribbean islands or Africa. The Indians would flood the labour market, and it was noted that they were “immoral heathens”³.

By 1848 the weekly newspaper *Trinidad Spectator*, edited by a coloured Creole, declared that “an active spirit of opposition to the coolie” was

*. This Paper is based largely on the author's *A Question of Labour: Indentured Immigration into Trinidad and British Guiana, 1875-1917*, (Kingston, Ian Randle, 1994), chs. 10 and 13.

2. C.O. 295/143, Macleod to Stanley, 3 August 1844, No. 65.

3. G. Carmichael, *History of the West Indian Islands of Trinidad and Tobago*. (London, Alvin Redman, 1961) pp. 215-16. C.Campbell, “Thomas Hinde of Trinidad, 1838-1848,” *Journal of Caribbean History* Vol. 21, No. 2 (1987), pp. 95-116.