The Income Tax, Indirect Rule and the Depression: the Gold Coast Riots of 1931.
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Résumé
S. Shaloff — Impôts sur le revenu, administration indirecte et crise économique: les émeutes de 1931 en Gold Coast. Le projet d'introduction d'un impôt sur le revenu était, dans l'esprit du gouverneur Slater, destiné, entre autres, à fournir les ressources nécessaires aux Trésoreries indigènes qui constituaient une pièce essentielle du système d'administration indirecte approuvé par les chefs traditionnels. Ce projet suscita les protestations des « évolués », soutenus par certains Européens, d'autant plus que la crise économique mondiale avait fait tomber le cours des produits. Le gouverneur ayant refusé de tenir compte de ces avertissements, des émeutes populaires éclatèrent à Sekondi et Cape Coast, attribuées par l'administration à des « voyous ». Le gouverneur fut finalement contraint de renoncer à son projet.

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Although the Gold Coast in the early 1930's might not have experienced the mature expression of African nationalism, nevertheless particular issues engendered responses evocative of later political upheavals. One of the most violent of these manifestations was in reaction to the efforts of the colonial regime to introduce an income tax. Ironically, that was only a subsidiary objective of the government. For Governor Ransford Slater (1927-1932) nothing was more important than the successful implementation of indirect rule. But in order for him to realize his ambitious scheme, he first had to win passage of a Native Authority Revenue Ordinance to permit traditional rulers to collect local revenues for local needs. To those chiefs who were sympathetic to his policy this was a sound and long overdue step. Because Nana Ofori Atta, the articulate paramount of Akim Abuakwa, believed that the management of fiscal affairs was the bedrock of any government worthy of the name, he vigorously supported the creation of a native treasury system in conformity with local tradition.1 Under the existing system, he complained, the chiefs were fiscally powerless and thus unable to attend to the vital needs of their communities without recourse to the colonial administration. According to him, it was high time that they no longer were treated like 'weaklings in the cradle . . . .'2

But there were large numbers of people, among the educated coastal elite and the rural commoners and even some of the host of lesser chiefs and functionaries in the countryside, who agreed with the Cape Coast-based Aborigines' Rights Protection Society (ARPS) that the projected native treasury system and the previously established Provincial Councils of Chiefs were clear violations of tradition because the senior chiefs alone were being aggrandized to the disadvantage of all other elements, thereby upsetting the sensitive power balance so vital to the well-being of the society. The critics of the proposal further alleged that the

2. 'Memorandum of Matters for Submission to Brig.-Gen. Sir S. H. Wilson by the Omanhene, Chiefs and People of Akim Abuakwa', September, 1928, Ghana National Archives, Accra. (Hereinafter cited as GNA.)

Cahiers d'Études Africaines, 54, XIV-2, pp. 359-375.
chiefs who cooperated with the British would become servants of the government and would no longer be representatives of their people.

The debate over indirect rule was complicated and to some degree distorted by the onset of the depression in late 1929, for the consequent collapse of the world cocoa market seriously undermined the economy of the Gold Coast which was heavily dependent on trade and the revenue secured from customs duties. In seeking a solution to the worsening financial crisis, Slater became persuaded of the potential advantages of an urban income tax. The inherent dangers of a tax of this kind had not gone unrecognized at the Colonial Office. One farsighted official had earlier commented that ‘the introduction of a system of direct taxation, no matter how wrapped up will probably prove too big a pill for the Colony’. For it was an anathema to the people. By committing himself to the initiation of such an impost, particularly in advance of the formal introduction of the Native Authority Revenue bill, Slater grievously erred, for not even the traditional leaders who desired indirect rule and stool treasuries could support the income tax proposal. What was noteworthy, was not that there was so much opposition to the government’s programs, but that the opposition should have succeeded so well in fending off both the income tax and a meaningful stool treasury system, thereby seriously diminishing the prospects for effective indirect rule.

Governor Slater had delegated his Secretary for Native Affairs, W. J. A. (Kibbi) Jones, to visit Nigeria to observe the system of indirect rule instituted there by Frederick Lugard. Upon his return, Jones prepared a report on December 16, 1929, which was incorporated into Slater’s confidential dispatch to the Colonial Office ‘Native Administration in the Gold Coast & its Dependencies’ on February 18, 1930. Slater’s objective was ‘to make the native authority’—i.e. in the Gold Coast the State Council presided over by the chief—a living part of the machinery of government’. To that end, he insisted, it was essential that they be provided with funds “with which to pay the salaries of their officials and to inaugurate schemes of development”.

3. Governor Sir Ransford Slater to Lord Passfield, August 16, 1931, ADM 12/3/54, GNA. He indicated that no less than seventy-seven per cent of the Gold Coast’s income had derived from import duties in 1930-31. With the people enjoying less purchasing power due to the depression, he explained that there was less buying and thus a sharp decline in government income.


5. Ernest Hamilton Bleasdell, the Provincial Commissioner at Koforidua, had indicated that ‘direct taxation is incomprehensible to the native of the Gold Coast’, who, because he cannot recognize the reasons for it, therefore considers it wrong. Thus the Poll Tax Ordinance of 1852 had failed and the Town Council Ordinance of 1896 had provoked riots. Furthermore, the people of Accra had resisted the graduated rate which was to have been applied under the Municipal Corporations Ordinance of 1924. See Bleasdell to Private Secretary, Government House, Accra, October 5, 1928, GNA.
that 'the essential foundation [...] of any stable system of Indirect Rule' was 'the duly regulated Stool Treasury.' Slater acknowledged that the general disfavor with which the people viewed direct taxation in the Gold Coast was 'probably due to a suspicion—when chiefs impose it—that much of the money will be improperly retained, and to a feeling [...] that Government, which came to the country after the natives had occupied it, had no right to exact it'. Still, he believed that he could overcome popular resentment by demonstrating that the intended tax would relieve the people of the burden of sundry miscellaneous levies while returning to them half of the proceeds collected.  

Although he expressed confidence in the ultimate success of his enterprise, the Governor conceded that there might be 'insuperable' obstacles 'to the eventual achievement of the policy of Indirect Rule' in the three main coastal towns of Accra, Cape Coast, and Sekondi, because 'education on European lines' had helped to produce an 'era of sophistication' there, which, Slater contended, had 'aggrandized the commoner at the expense of the influence of the local chiefs', thereby encouraging 'both a democratic outlook and a restiveness', which he considered 'the negation of native ideas of Government'. Why he then pursued the course he did in these communities, to the detriment of his primary objective, is a question which deserves further consideration.

On August 16, 1931, Slater forwarded to Lord Passfield at the Colonial Office a request for permission to introduce a tax of 6d on the £ (or 2½ per cent) effective April 1, 1932, on the gross earnings of all males having an income in excess of £40. Here, too, his model was Nigerian, for he based his proposal on the draft Nigerian Non-native (Protectorate) Income Tax Ordinance of 1931. 'It will be a good move politically', the governor asserted, 'to subject first to (direct) taxation those who by reason of their higher income can best afford to pay, and thus to divide the opposition to direct tax ...'. Moreover, he confessed that though he did 'not propose to stress publicly the idea of income tax as an alternative to reduction of existing emoluments, that is, in fact, one of the reasons for taking the step now proposed'. Ironically, at the same time he was envisioning the collection of an urban income tax within eight months, he calculated that it would require at least eighteen months of careful propaganda to prepare the way for 'a local tax on assessed income, collectable by the Native Authorities and spendable (as to 50%) on local services'. Since the former move was even more unpopular than the latter, Slater obviously had not sufficiently considered the consequences of his plans. Otherwise he would not have simultaneously petitioned the Colonial Office for approval to impose an equally controversial water rate in the same urban centers. The prospect that one or

6. Slater to Lord Passfield, February 18, 1930. CO 96/693/6599/1930, pp. 3-5, marked confidential, PRO.
7. Ibid.
8. Slater to Lord Passfield, August 16, 1931, ADM 12/3/54, GNA.
both of these rates might be levied was certain to stir up angry opposition in the coastal communities.

Slater was given leave to introduce both measures on September 22, 1931, and two days later he announced, in the Legislative Council, his intention to move the passage of ‘an Ordinance to regulate the Levying and Collection of an income tax in the Colony’. ‘The necessity for direct taxation’, Slater stressed, ‘[had] been recognized by every Government in British and foreign tropical Africa, with the one exception of the Gold Coast.’ And the time had finally arrived, he asserted, ‘when the Gold Coast Government also must, in the interests of the people themselves, fall into line with the other administrations . . .’ If the African population wished to be considered ‘civilised’, he admonished, then it had to be willing to assume what Lord Lugard had styled the ‘common burden of civilisation’, i.e., the income tax. Although Slater maintained that he had effected a reduction of £500,000 in recurrent expenditures over the previous nine months, the decline in revenue had been so great that the anticipated disparity between income and outgo for 1932-33 allowed of no other alternative but ‘new forms of taxation’.

However, the newly elected Legislative Council representative for Accra, Frederick Victor Nanka-Bruce, a physician and a newspaper proprietor who could by no stretch of the imagination be described as a radical, cautioned that it was not a propitious moment to propose new taxation because the people were in an ‘irritated militant spirit’. He warned that since they know nothing about world economic pressures and the gold standard it was natural for them to blame the government and the European merchants when things went bad. Moreover, he failed to see why they should be compelled to assume the major burden of bailing out the government particularly when their own welfare responsibilities had been stretched to the limit of their resources. With conditions as bad as they were, there was little inclination to subsidize even ‘progressive’ projects. He emphasized that given the popular opposition to direct taxation, it would be better by far for the government to pare official salaries by ten per cent and to turn to the Reserve Fund to balance the budget ‘instead of resorting to fresh taxation’. Nanka-Bruce closed by paraphrasing the words of the American revolutionaries in demanding that in every country where direct taxation is imposed there

9. J. H. Thomas to the Governor of the Gold Coast, September 22, 1931, ADM 12/3/198, GNA. The water rate was delayed due to the depression and did not go into effect until 1938.
10. Legislative Council Debates, September 24, 1931, pp. 275-282. Slater noted that the stiffer duties which had earlier been imposed on spirits in response to the African members’ demands had severely reduced the government’s income. He projected a deficit of £400,000 for 1932-33, £240,000 of which, he hoped to make good through the income tax. He considered the emergency so severe that he believed it imprudent to attempt to relieve it by resorting to the £1,300,000 Reserve Fund. The actual deficits for 1931-32 and 1932-33 were £530,453 and £2,600. These figures are cited by Peter C. Sederberg, in ‘The Gold Coast under Colonial Rule: an Expenditure Analysis’, African Studies Review, XIV (2), 1971, p. 184.
must be equal representation’. His fellow moderate, Arku Korsah, the respected representative from Cape Coast, had earlier denounced direct taxation as something ‘the people of this country have always regarded [. . .] as humiliating and against the principles of progressive states’.12

The Colonial Secretary, Geoffry Alexander Stafford Northcote, attempted to rebut these arguments. In essence, he insisted that it was the responsibility of every citizen to contribute, as far as his means would permit, to the maintenance of his government. And, since it was obvious that indirect levies could be avoided, it was therefore necessary that everyone above a certain income should share the burden of direct taxation.13 But given the fact that the British administration was imposed and alien, it was no wonder that there was an absence of a popular will to sacrifice on its behalf. Since the government, moreover, was unwilling to offer the people neither full representation nor financial autonomy, Nanka-Bruce concluded that it would be better ‘that we remain where we are and try to balance our budget in some other way’.14 Northcote was particularly perplexed by this last point, for he could not see why the government should be obliged to pay such a heavy price in order to secure an income tax when similar demands were not made in response to an increase in customs duties. In addition, he contended that considerable retrenchment had already taken place and that European allowances could not be reduced without a violation of contracts and the inevitable exodus of the most capable civil servants.15

At that point, Nana Ofori Atta addressed himself to the substance of Northcote’s comments. If the economic crisis proved to be only a temporary one then the administration, he was willing to concede, had performed its job admirably, but if it turned out to be yet more serious and prolonged then much still remained to be done. And, if the Colonial Secretary was correct in his assertion that sentiment should not be allowed to influence decisions, then it was far better that salaries and staff be reduced, dubious expenditure eliminated, and the Reserve Fund utilized in preference to the ‘revolutionary’ and ‘novel’ income tax.16 Interestingly enough, this opinion was shared by two of the European mercantile members on the Council who dismissed the notion that retrenchment would impair the recruitment of qualified personnel.17

13. Ibid., September 24, 1931, pp. 386-388.
15. Ibid., pp. 388-394. He claimed that 267 Europeans and 309 Africans had been retrenched. The Governor believed that a reduction in emoluments should only be the last resort of a ‘sane’ government.
16. Ibid., pp. 398-403. He wanted to do away with the ‘unnecessary’ Lands Department and called for an investigation of the deficit-ridden Railroad Department.
17. Ibid., pp. 409-410. Reginald Harris and J. D. McKay were the two European unofficials who preferred retrenchment to taxation.
The African members’ insistence upon a scaling down of allowances and the dismissal of redundant staff must be viewed in the context of the government’s decision the previous year to reduce the starting salary of probationary African clerks from £60 to £48 annually. The nine African unofficials quite rightly suspected that regardless of the professed reasons for the step that the real intent had been to bring the government rate down to the level of the banking and mercantile establishments. In that instance, moreover, as was the case with the income tax proposal, the Africans were not consulted before the measure was introduced. Even the Governor, in retrospect, had found it necessary to confess that the procedure had ‘not been very happy’. Thus, there was more than ample reason for the African representatives to be suspicious of the Slater administration and for them to question whether financial distress was the real reason for the Governor’s proposal and whether that solution was the best response to the emergency.

Although I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson and Nnamdi Azikiwe had not as yet arrived on the scene, Joseph Danquah, Bankole Awoonor Renner, and R. B. Wuta-Ofei, were more than capable of articulating the hopes of the masses and the frustrations of the elite in newspapers such as *The Times of West Africa*, *The Gold Coast Leader*, and *The Gold Coast Spectator*. Even Nanka-Bruce’s *Gold Coast Independent* belabored the administration on the issue of the income tax. Though their circulation was limited, they managed to influence far more people than just the literate population. It was the contention of the press that: (1) past administrations had been profligate; (2) further economies were not only preferable but possible; (3) too much revenue had been diverted to pay European salaries and allowances; (4) insufficient consideration had been paid to the varying circumstances of potential taxpayers; (5) the proposal clearly violated the terms of the British charter of settlement; (6) it was likely that the burden would in time become dearer and would be felt more widely.

Despite the criticism, Slater reaffirmed his determination to the Colonial Office on October 31, 1931, to push ahead with direct taxation, for without it, he asserted, it would be ‘impossible to establish “Indirect Rule” on a sure basis’. The urban income tax, he reiterated, was merely intended as a complement to the more important Native Revenue bill. Although he was aware of the caveat of Sir Hugh Clifford (1912-1919)

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18. Minute by Alex Fiddian, October 18, 1930, CO 96/693/66/1930, PRO. Fiddian, the senior assistant secretary in charge of the West African department, indicated that he would ‘go a little further’ than Slater in scoring the tactics used. Lord Passfield was another critic of the procedure adopted by the Governor. See Further Correspondence Relating to the Revision of the Initial Rates of Salary in the African Civil Service in Continuation of Sessional Paper No 1 of 1930-31*, *Gold Coast Sessional Paper, No 11* of 1931-32.

19. Slater to Fiddian, December 10, 1931, CO 96/699, 7050A/1931, PRO. The three editors were viewed with great disfavor by the administration and Wuta-Ofei was shortly thereafter to be classed as a ‘link-subversive’.
that the Gold Coast African viewed direct taxation as an ‘injustice and an indignity’, nevertheless he was confident of success. With the cooperation of the chiefs and consequent upon the systematic pro-tax propaganda of the District Commissioners, he foresaw no difficulties in the countryside. But he first chose to do battle surprisingly in the less receptive urban centers rather than in the supposedly more placid rural areas.

What Slater had probably least of all anticipated was the determined opposition of a substantial portion of the European commercial community to his proposed income tax. Nowhere was this sentiment more clearly revealed than at Sekondi where on the evening of October 26, 1931, representatives of the UAC, UTC, SCOA, and CFAO attended a meeting at the Optimism Club together with, among others, the omanhene of English and Dutch Sekondi and a number of African lawyers in an effort to devise a strategy to defeat the income tax. Twenty Europeans, including the supervisory agent of the UAC (Mr. Norman), were among the 186 persons who signed a petition critical of the proposal. Of the three chairmen of the meeting, one was a European, Jan H. Koens, who shared the leadership role with James Mercer and Francis Awoonor Williams.

In fact, the allegedly ‘inflammatory and mischievous’ demand of Koens that British administrators reduce their salaries in emulation of their colleagues at home was later declared by Slater to have been the cause of the next day’s violence. Actually, it appears that Koens was either an undercover agent who played his role too effectively or someone who, in this instance, was moved by sincere economic conviction rather than by race or politics. When he had been in Britain the previous year he had proved to be such a reliable source of information as regards the black community of London that he had been urged to keep his eyes and ears open. He was especially commended for his ability to divert public agitation into constitutional channels. Slater, however, viewed him as an ‘undesirable character’ who was mainly adept at tearing him down. And while others might have considered him a valued intelligence operative of the Colonial Office reporting on black and white personalities, the Governor wished it to be known that the police shared his opinion that Koens was a ‘Mr. Facing both ways’.

21. G. H. Sumner Wilson to Colonial Secretary, October 28, 1931, and H. J. O’Connor, Commissioner of Police in the Western Province to the Inspector-General of Police, October 27, 1931, enclosed in GAS.
22. Slater to Sir Philip Cunliffe-Lister, November 16, 1931, ADM 12/3/55, GNA. He asserted that Koens had shocked the Sekondi European community by alleging that the bill would lead to mortal fighting. See as well Slater to Cunliffe-Lister, April 22, 1932, ADM 1/2/1724, GNA.
23. Minute by T. D. Shiels, December 13, 1930, CO 96/695/786/A/1930, PRO. Also see minute by Fiddian, November 21, 1931, CO 96/695/695/B/1931, PRO.
24. Slater to Governor Arnold Hodson of Sierra Leone, December 5, 1931, ADM 12/5/7, GNA. Hodson became Governor of the Gold Coast in 1934 succeeding
Meanwhile, although Awoonor Williams was identified as one of the powers behind the stool of Sekondi, Mercer played the more important role in the general politics of protest. Indeed, he was destined to die in an automobile accident while in London in 1934 as part of the Gold Coast and Ashanti delegation which was seeking the repeal of the Sedition and Waterworks ordinances. The fact that he had been a recipient of the King’s Medal for meritorious service did not deter the Fanti surveyor and auctioneer from charging that the income tax was intended solely to benefit white officials at a time when the people demanded a cut in European salaries and allowances.25

On the morning of October 27, while Koens and Mercer and others of their party were calling upon the Acting Commissioner of the Western Province, George Harold Sumner Wilson, for the purpose of presenting their petition, bands of youths and women beating tins and carrying banners reading: ‘Down: Down: Down: with Income Tax Bill’, ‘Income Tax is akin to slavery’, ‘If the country can’t pay, it simply can’t’, ‘Away with Allowances’, and ‘Practice Intensive Pruning’ marched and demonstrated with the blessing of the modern and traditional elites.26 Soon, some of the more boisterous protestors began to unearth plants and to throw stones. One European woman was cut over the eye by a missile while another was spat upon and though neither was seriously injured it represented a blow to European prestige. Banks, government offices, and European bungalows were the main targets of the rioters who compelled the adjournment of the Police Magistrate’s Court.27

Koens and the omanhene rushed to apologize to the governor for the overexuberance of the crowd, but Slater was not appeased. As an indication of his deep displeasure, he called Reginald Harris on the carpet to complain to him about the involvement of the UAC agents (Lewis and Norman) in the disturbances which many had taken to calling the ‘United Africa Riots’.28 In no uncertain terms, he impressed upon him his obligation to discourage his commercial colleagues from henceforth making similar ‘fiery’ and ‘distorted’ speeches which could trigger further ‘ugly incidents’.29

Shenton Thomas (1932-1934) who had termed Koens ‘a nasty fellow’ in a report to Cunliffe-Lister, June 23, 1934, CO 96/717/21750/1934, PRO.

25. O’Connor to IGP, Accra, October 27, 1931, ADM 12/3/55, GNA. A. C. Duncan-Johnstone, who later served as the Provincial Commissioner of the Western Province, described Mercer in his informal diary as a tout for lawyer George J. Christian, the Legislative Council representative for Sekondi. See the Unpublished Confidential Diary of A. C. Duncan-Johnstone MSS Afr. S. 593, April 27, 1934, p. 24 (Rhodes House, Oxford University).

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., see as well: W. Price Jones, Police Magistrate-Sekondi, to Commissioner of Police-Sekondi, October 30, 1931, and Cunliffe-Lister to Sir Cyril Cobb, M. P., CO 96/699/7050/B/1931, n. d., marked private and personal, PRO. The Railroad, Education, and District Commissioner’s offices were visited by the demonstrators.

28. Slater to Fiddian, November 1, 1931, ADM 12/5/171, GNA.

29. Ibid., Slater to Fiddian, October 31, 1931. He contended that Koens was playing a ‘double game’.
Except for the prominent European involvement, similar incidents occurred at Shama and Cape Coast. When Sumner Wilson arrived in Shama to justify the proposed ordinance, the omahene, K. Binna II, presented him with a petition protesting the ‘introduction of such an anomaly as the income tax’ and demanding in its stead a ten per cent reduction in European remuneration. Women and children crowded the town square beating tin cans and iron sheets. They showed their discontent with the Commissioner’s comments by hurling stones and shouting insults. When Sumner Wilson was finished the omahene had to escort him to his car through the mass of demonstrators who sought to tear off his clothes. His apparent ‘solicitousness’ for the well-being of the Commissioner, however, was not much appreciated in Accra, for Northcote blamed him for having deliberately stirred up the ‘roughs’ who had engaged in ‘a cheap display of impertinence’. Shama, he explained to the Colonial Office, was ‘a notoriously ill-disciplined place’. That, of course, was the easy way of dismissing opposition to the tax measure. According to the official line, anyone who resisted the bill was either a ‘rough’, a ‘hooligan’, a ‘rowdie’, or a ‘cowboy’. At best, they were considered to have been mislead by their ignorant chiefs or misdirected by venal agitators. Certainly, what transpired in Cape Coast was viewed in that light.

As the headquarters of the ARPS, Cape Coast had long enjoyed the reputation of being the center of anti-European, anti-colonial feeling. The omahene, Mbra III, was alleged to be ‘the tool of Mr. W.E.G. Sekyi’ a man whom Slater termed ‘a notorious extremist’ and who Shenton Thomas, his successor, labelled a ‘link-subversive’. In order to deny the popular basis of the coastal opposition to the income tax, the colonial administration deluded itself into believing that the women and children who participated in the demonstrations were ‘hooligans’ unrepresentative of the general community. Now, while that was doubtless a deceit, it would be equally wrong to view the protestors as a flock of innocents whose actions in every instance were spontaneous. The gong-gongs of Mbra III quite clearly roused the people of Cape Coast on the morning of October 28. Thereafter, according to official police reports, the largely female assemblage was directed by the elders of the stool. In any event, a short time after the crowd had gathered, stones were hurled at all the lamppost fixtures and at any European driving by in a car. European establishments, both public and private, were the next targets.

30. Omahin’s Office, Shama, to Acting Provincial Commissioner of Western Province, October 29, 1931, enclosed in Northcote to J. H. Thomas, November 3, 1931, ADM 12/3/55, GNA.
31. Ibid., Sumner Wilson to Colonial Secretary, October 30, 1931.
32. Northcote to Fiddian, November 2, 1931, ADM 12/5/171, GNA.
33. Slater to Cunliffe-Lister, December 7, 1931, ADM 12/3/55, marked confidential, GNA.
34. Governor Shenton Thomas to Cunliffe-Lister, January 3, and February 15, 1934, ADM 12/5/103, GNA.
of the unruly protestors. Since the police appeared only to antagonize the so-called ‘riff-raff’ and ‘boat-boys’, local authorities decided to keep them out of sight in an effort to pacify the people. However, following the accidental collision of the protestors and a police contingent which had been assigned to protect the High Court, the police station itself became the target of the angry demonstrators. Only at this point, some seven and one half hours after the angry crowd had assembled, were the omanhene’s gong-gongs sounded once again to halt the violence and chiefs Moore and Sakyiama intervened to persuade the militants to retire. In this instance, it should be noted that the people had been additionally enraged by the imposition of a rent for market stalls which had previously been free.

In the end, very few persons were punished for their participation in the disorders and despite all of the shouting and scampering about no one was seriously injured. What had been breached, however, was the good order of the colony and that was far more frightening to the administration than anything else. Because he was afraid of further outbreaks of violence and distressed by the apparent frustration of his tax proposal, Slater upbraided Mbra III and twenty of his councillors for having fomented the upheaval. But the omanhene retorted that it was the police who were at fault for having stirred up the peaceful marchers by their brutal conduct.

Whether or not the government’s response to the rioting had been overly lenient was a subject of bitter dispute within the administration in the aftermath of the disturbances. Northcote’s opinion that police forbearance was preferable to repression as a means of restoring order was not shared by Slater, who considered such a course an unwise confession of weakness which would inevitably invite renewed obstreperousness. At Whitehall, while there were some reservations expressed about both their performances, there was general agreement that the ‘intelligentsia’ had exploited the situation in order to hasten the day when they could have their own way. Alex Fiddian was particularly upset that some of the white merchants should have leagued themselves with what he

35. H. Pilgrim Morris, Assistant Commissioner of Police-Cape Coast, to Colonial Secretary, November 2, 1931, enclosed in Slater to Cunliffe-Lister, December 7, 1931, ADM 12/3/55, GNA. The omanhene had ordered a cessation of work for that day. Among the offices stoned were those belonging to the Acting Police Magistrate, the Collector of Customs, the Assistant District Commissioner, the Medical Officer of Health, the Sanitary Inspector, and the Agricultural Officer. Ironically, Chief Moore was arrested the following year for allegedly provoking the asafo company riots.

36. Hon. Commissioner of Central Province’s Draft Confidential Diary, 1931-32, October 29, 1931, ADM 21/6/19, GNA.

37. Slater to Cunliffe-Lister, December 7, 1931, ADM 12/3/55, GNA. Of the thirteen persons who were brought up on charges for their participation in the Cape Coast riot two went free, two ran away, eight received sentences of three months of hard labor, and one was fined £5 or one month of hard labor. No one was prosecuted in Sekondi. See the West Africa Times, October 28-31, 1931.

38. Slater to Fiddian, November 1, 1931, ADM 12/5/171, GNA.
considered to be a pack of ‘half educated’, ‘frankly intolerable’, ‘chartered libertines’. 39

Fiddian’s views were endorsed by Sir Philip Cunliffe-Lister, the new Colonial Secretary, who took office in November, 1931. ‘The impression forced upon me’, he commented, ‘is that the indulgence which has traditionally been extended to the behaviour of the rowdy element in these and possibly other towns in the Colony has been carried too far.’ Henceforth, he demanded that chiefs and elders should be obliged to live up to their responsibility to assist the government to maintain peace. 40

A circular on law and order stressing the need to restrain the ‘hoodlum’ element and the importance of upholding the government’s prestige was therefore distributed to all police and political officers in the colony on April 28, 1932. 41 Under the existing statutes, however, Slater believed himself to be powerless to depose or even to suspend recalcitrant chiefs, and with conditions as tense as they were, he was reluctant to seek that power for fear that it would jeopardize his chances of gaining general acceptance of the principle of direct taxation. 42

In actuality, despite all of the post-riot rhetoric celebrating law and order, Slater was compelled to acknowledge the victory of the ‘hooligans’ and the ‘intelligentsia’. Thus, at a closed meeting of the all-white Executive Council on November 9, 1931, he authorized the postponement of the Income Tax Bill in order to salvage his broader indirect rule program. The Council, as well, agreed to consider the question of a reduction of official emoluments at its next scheduled session in February, 1932. Although Slater hastened to assure Cunliffe-Lister that his decision did not connote ‘even a temporary surrender to the traditional and unreasoned opposition of the “Coast” peoples to direct taxation’, nevertheless he had to admit that his propagandists had been outmaneuvered by the ‘agitators’, who had enjoyed considerable success in both urban and rural areas in persuading the masses that they would be hurt by the proposed levies. Their activities had proved ‘all the more effective’, he alleged, ‘because at Sekondi [where it first surfaced] it had the open support of the most influential trading firm in the Colony.’ This was ‘the first occasion’, he lamented, ‘in the history of this Colony on which certain of the non-government Europeans have made common cause with the Africans against government.’ And, though he hated to give the impression that he was backing down under pressure, the Governor contended that he had no alternative but to delay the income tax, if he wished to keep alive the principle of indirect rule. While it was true, he concluded, that Jones had frankly acknowledged ‘his share in

39. Minutes by Fiddian, November 21, and December 27, 1931, and January 8, 1932, CO 96/699/7050/B/1931, PRO.
40. Cunliffe-Lister to Slater, February 16, 1932, ADM 12/1/79, GNA.
41. Northcote to Cunliffe-Lister, May 3, 1932, ADM 12/3/56, marked confidential, GNA.
42. Slater to Cunliffe-Lister, April 22, 1932, ADM 1/2/1724, GNA.
the miscalculation,' he wanted it to be clearly understood that 'the responsibility for the lack of foresight is, of course, mine.'

Slater simultaneously notified Donald Cameron and Frederick Lugard of his intentions possibly because he had counselled with them in the past regarding his plans to initiate indirect rule. Thus he told Lugard that the withdrawal of the Income Tax Bill did not mean that he was 'throwing up the sponge'. He contended that it was merely a tactical retreat to facilitate the eventual enactment of his Native Revenue measure. But Cameron, who was informed by Slater that the disorderly demonstrations would probably delay matters for no more than eighteen months, came to the conclusion that regardless of the Governor's optimism, indirect rule would be impossible to establish in the Gold Coast because, unlike Northern Nigeria, authority flowed from the bottom of the society to the top.

Slater adopted the same half-apologetic, half-confident tone in conveying his plans to Alex Fiddian. Thus he projected the inception of indirect rule inside of two years while at the same time raising the possibility that it might become necessary for the government to reduce salaries for a temporary period. Fiddian noted that the very advisors who had recommended the introduction of the income tax in October now all affirmed Slater's assessment that a tactical mistake had been made 'when it was decided to introduce income tax as a step towards the more general measure of direct taxation instead of promoting the two together as the complements each of the other'. Jones, in particular, was criticized by some at the Colonial Office for having misguided the Governor in affairs not appropriately within his jurisdiction.

Meanwhile, Slater's retreat certainly did not occasion rejoicing among the European officials in the field. A.F.L. Wilkinson considered it a most 'awful example of weakness'; a weakwilled surrender to the 'shouts of the agitators'. The 'feeling is very strong,' he remarked in his diary on March 4, 1932, 'that the Governor and his advisors (notably one who

43. Slater to Cunliffe-Lister, November 16, 1931, ADM 12/3/55 GNA. He maintained 'there is no question but that a European [Jan Koens] in the employ of the same firm organized the demonstration at Sekondi.'

44. Slater to Lugard, December 5, 1931, ADM 12/5/7, GNA. Lugard answered that Slater's action was 'beyond question the right thing to do'. See Lugard to Slater, December 30, 1931, ADM 12/5/15, GNA. Meanwhile, Slater informed Fiddian that Harris and his kind had germinated the anti-tax riots in retaliation for the government having kept its salaries intact. See Slater to Fiddian, November 14, 1931, ADM 12/5/7, GNA.

45. Ibid., Slater to Cameron, November 16, 1931.

46. Minute by H. F. Downie, March 27, 1936, CO 96/730/31228/1936, PRO. Cameron had indicated his opinion to John Curtois Howard, the former Attorney General of the Gold Coast, who relayed these sentiments to Downie while he was in Britain en route to Ceylon and his new assignment.

47. Slater to Fiddian, November 14, 1931, ADM 12/5/7, GNA. He hoped still to be governor when the income tax was revived and passed.

48. Minute by Fiddian, November 14, 1931, CO 96/699/7050/A/1931, PRO.

49. Ibid., Minute by Sir Cecil Bottomley, December 15, 1931. Bottomley wondered whether Slater had fully recovered from his illness of the year before.
is a Welshman and notoriously out for number one) will do anything rather than put through any measure that arouses opposition from the Africans.’ Wilkinson believed that since Slater apparently found it easier to soak the civil servants and the European merchants instead of sticking to his guns, he and his colleagues were faced with the prospect of a ten per cent levy on their salaries and a denial of an allowance to which they were entitled. A.C. Duncan-Johnstone asserted that the people had turned to the African lawyers for support against the ‘corrupt’, traditional court and treasury systems because of the impotence of the district officers under the existing Native Administration Ordinance. Thus even within his own administration there was less than unanimous support for Slater’s fiscal and political programs.

Slater was confronted with a serious dilemma, for the repercussions of the economic collapse threatened his plans to establish indirect rule on a sound financial basis. His alternative, as he viewed them, were either: (a) more taxes; (b) a cut in posts; (c) a reduction in emoluments; or (d) the utilization of the Reserve Fund. The Further Retrenchment Committee, which he had appointed, and which consisted of the Colonial Secretary, the Treasurer, Reginald Harris, J. F. W. Schofield, Nana Ofori Atta, and Nana Ayirebi Akuah, had met between October 5-21, 1931, without he maintained, agreeing on much of anything. As Slater had already ruled out the first of his two options, it was a matter then of deciding how far to proceed with the third course before resorting to the last. Although he personally believed that a cut in emoluments is the last step that should be taken, in the end, he reluctantly followed the unhappy advice of his Treasurer and Colonial Secretary in projecting a ten per cent salary decrease for everyone who earned at least £48 a year, excepting the probationary African clerks, in the estimates which he submitted for 1932-33.

Slater did his best to conceal the reality of his intended retreat when he addressed the Legislative Council on March 1, 1932. Instead of ‘dispassionate study’ the Income Tax Bill, he angrily commented, had evoked only ‘sheer invective and abuse’. ‘These appeals to prejudice’, he continued, ‘had the not unnatural result that the uninstructed classes in Sekondi, Cape Coast and elsewhere were inflamed, and committed acts of violence which served merely to besmirch the good name of the Gold Coast.’ His condemnation of such conduct was followed by an open appeal for the support of the traditional authorities. Thus he emphasized

51. ‘Notes on the Native Administration Ordinance, 1936-1942’, Duncan-Johnstone Papers, 5/8 (Rhodes House, Oxford University).
52. Slater to Cunliffe-Lister, November 16, 1931, ADM 12/3/55, GNA.
54. Slater to Cunliffe-Lister, November 16, 1931, ADM 12/3/55, GNA. He projected as well a scaling down of travel and entertainment allowances.
that ‘the principal object of direct taxation is to provide funds for the
development of Native Administrations, and, subject to any recommend-
dations which the representatives of the Provincial Councils may make
[. . .] I propose that [. . .] all persons who are subject to the Native
Administration Ordinance shall pay their direct tax to the Native
Authorities’. So that ‘the whole scheme may come into operation at
the same time’, he indicated, almost in passing, that the Income Tax Bill
would be delayed until the Native Administration Revenue Ordinance was
ready for enactment.\(^{55}\)

The response of the African members of the Legislative Council
to Slater’s announcement was mixed. The Provincial Council represen-
tatives were pleased that the income tax had been tabled and they wel-
comed official assurances that the Native Administration Revenue Bill
would substantially restore their traditional rights and was a promise
of ultimate self-rule.\(^{56}\) The elected urban members, however, were not
so satisfied. As far as George J. Christian of Sekondi was concerned,
the Gold Coast had no need of the ‘obnoxious’ Native Administration
Revenue measure, for such an ordinance, he contended, threatened
chaos and division and could even spur a revolt by those people who
could not afford to pay a rate.\(^{57}\)

Certainly, after their humiliating capitulation on the income tax,
the European officials were not at all pleased by the continued African
assault upon government policies. Thus Jones bitterly rebuked Christian
and ironically questioned whether his West Indian birth disqualified him
from participating in the debate. Then, in response to Korsah’s plea
for a ten year delay, Jones snidely inquired whether that meant that
the Gold Coast population was less intelligent, honest, or prepared than
the people of Tanganyika or Nigeria?\(^{58}\) What the government intended,
Slater later advised Cunliffe-Lister, was that ‘all direct taxation of
natives [. . .] will be levied under the Native Revenue Ordinance by
and through the Native Authorities. Direct taxation in the form of
income tax will apply only to Europeans and other non-natives. But
everyone will pay direct taxation in one or the other form’.\(^{59}\)

Since the success of such a program was presumed to depend to a
considerable extent upon the support of the paramount chiefs, there
was keen government interest in the Joint Conference of the Provincial

\(^{55}\) Legislative Council Debates, March 1, 1932, pp. 23-24. Also see George

\(^{56}\) Legislative Council Debates, March 8, 1932. This was Ofori Atta’s view.


\(^{59}\) Slater to Cunliffe-Lister, March 31, 1932, ADM 12/3/56, GNA. He asserted
that the Ga State rulers were behind the Native Administration Revenue Ordinance
and that Sekondi’s leaders might fall into line. Cape Coast, he admitted, remained
a very dubious proposition. However, six of the incumbent stool holders of Accra
had made clear their opposition to the income tax. See Slater to Cunliffe-Lister,
November 17, 1931, ADM 12/3/55, GNA.
Councils which convened at Saltpond between April 19-23, 1932. The Eastern representatives, dominated by Nana Ofori Atta, were the most sympathetic to the government’s position, but while they may have been willing ‘to accept a scheme for local Self-Government’, they wanted it to be clearly understood that they did not view the income tax ‘as a necessary prelude to the introduction of the Native Administration Revenue Bill’. Except for Nana Ayirebi Acquah III, the omanhene of Winneba, who sat in the Legislative Council as a designee of the Central Provincial Council, there was very little sentiment in either the Western or the Central delegations in favor of the Native Administration Revenue proposal. Numbers of ARPS supporters, meanwhile, were present at Saltpond and their boisterous anti-indirect rule tactics often disrupted the proceedings.60 The disharmony and confusion continued even after the meeting was apparently over, for no sooner had the Eastern delegates departed then the rump of largely Central Province representatives passed a resolution declaring that they were ‘not prepared to accept the suggested measure under any circumstances’. This act understandably grieved the Eastern conferees who had been led to believe that a joint memorial acceptable to all parties would be drawn up in the future. They hastened to disassociate themselves from the sentiments of the resolution.61 In effect, what transpired at the conference clearly demonstrated how futile it was for the government to rely upon the senior chiefs for meaningful assistance.

We might conclude this paper with an examination of the motivations and machinations of all parties to the tax dispute. Ransford Slater’s attempt to advance indirect rule by winning popular acceptance of the concept of ‘local taxation for local needs’ encountered more than the normal amount of opposition (not insignificant by itself) due to the impact of the depression. Because he desperately needed to exploit new sources of revenue in order to forestall economic collapse and to preserve the posts and privileges of his European staff, he decided to introduce an urban income tax and to tie it in with the Native Administration Revenue Bill which was supposed to establish the fiscal foundation of indirect rule in the countryside. But he committed a fatal error, however, when he moved the income tax bill first and thereby played into the hands of those who opposed direct taxation of any kind.

The objections expressed by the African minority on the Legislative Council to the government’s proposals ordinarily were ignored no matter

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60. Northcote to Cunliffe-Lister, August 20, 1932, ADM 12/3/57, GNA. According to the Provincial Commissioner, C. E. Skene, James Mercer, in behalf of the Western Provincial Council, made a ‘provocative’ speech critical of the proposed Native Administration Revenue Ordinance. Meanwhile, the omanhene of Akim Kotoku, Nana Atta Fua II, on two occasions led approximately two hundred protestors in disruptions of the proceedings. Four sheep were sacrificed and £28 16s was given to the Eastern representatives by the Central Province chiefs to expiate the insults they had endured. See The Times of West Africa, April 26, 1932.

61. Ibid.
how articulately they were advanced. And, while it is true that the barbed criticisms of the African press were more than casually resented, nevertheless they also failed to change the government's mind. What could not be so easily dismissed, however, were the violent demonstrations in Sekondi, Shama, and Cape Coast and the complicity of the European commercial community in the anti-tax coalition. Many of the merchants apparently resented having to assume an additional tax burden because the government had not sufficiently retrenched. When taken all together, these manifestations of antagonism were sufficient to persuade Slater of the need to postpone the income tax so that he might retain a chance of enacting his broader program. As it turned out, there was an inadequate base of support for taxation even in the rural areas. In fact, following the Saltpond conference, the heads of the asafo companies and the subchiefs of Akim Abuakwa, Ofori Atta's very own state, evidenced their opposition to the proposed Native Administration Revenue Bill and the narrow elite which stood to benefit from it, by instigating the destoolment of all five of the wing chiefs. Two of the 'main wings' of the State went so far as to proclaim their nonallegiance to Ofori Atta because of his endorsement of the measure.62

The educated urban elite and particularly the ARPS, which posed as the champion of tradition, greatly benefited from the administration's incompetence. In large measure, the 'intelligentsia' succeeded in countering the maladroit propaganda efforts of the government simply by exposing the ways in which indirect rule threatened to distort the normal balance of power in African society. Of course, in retrospect, it is easy to see why, in the depths of a depression and in the aftermath of a bitter cocoa hold-up, it was possible to arouse so much opposition to a regime which insisted on promoting an income tax, a water rate, and other forms of direct taxation. The masses were led to believe, not altogether incorrectly, that such measures were intended solely to benefit a small official community whose jobs and emoluments were protected while African posts and wages were being simultaneously reduced.

Since Slater was not ultimately prepared to ride roughshod over the tax protestors, he was compelled to admit defeat. In the end, he failed to secure either 'real' indirect rule—which even some of his subordinates did not fully understand or support—or the income tax which did not come into effect until April 1, 1944. Direct taxation in the rural areas and the inauguration of a properly regulated and funded Stool Treasury system were also some years away.63 Meanwhile, those


63. As of September, 1936, those states having Stool Treasuries, which had been authorized the previous year, were given the option of collecting levies. In 1939, the colonial regime was empowered to compel States to establish a treasury subject to imperial supervision. Finally, in 1944 a local rate was sanctioned 'to provide the Native Treasuries with a regular income from direct taxation'. See Lord Hailey, African Survey: Revised 1956, London, 1957, pp. 524 and 666-677.
chiefs who lent their support to the Native Administration Revenue Ordinance suffered a diminution of prestige, for they were blamed by the people for having supported direct rates.

One clear result of the conflict was that the coastal residents managed to avoid an income tax for twelve more years and a water rate for six years. The elite naturally incited the masses against these measures by making it appear that the financial burden entailed would fall on everyone and not just those who were better off. What was probably most significant, however, was the impetus the government retreat gave to future protest. As had been the case earlier, when the controversial Lands Bill of 1897 had been withdrawn, the masses were encouraged to repeat their violent response when they believed themselves similarly threatened. Mass involvement, articulate leadership, and urban-rural cooperation had all been vital factors in the popular triumph. A few stones, a few yells, and a few hostile white faces had caused the administration to panic. Not every issue would produce such an effective coalition and thus in most instances defeat and not victory was the inevitable result. But on those few occasions when there was a will to resist, the authorities paid some heed, for by their numbers the masses could jeopardize the regime. Ultimately, however, it would require a new kind of leadership to seize the day, one which identified with the masses permanently and not merely when they could be exploited in order to preserve the privileges of the elite. Following the Second World War, the ‘hooligans’ of the 1930’s would find their Messiah in Kwame Nkrumah much to the chagrin of the colonial regime and in some ways the deeper disappointment of the coastal ‘intelligentsia’.

S. SHALOFF — Impôts sur le revenu, administration indirecte et crise économique : les émeutes de 1931 en Gold Coast. Le projet d’introduction d’un impôt sur le revenu était, dans l’esprit du gouverneur Slater, destiné, entre autres, à fournir les ressources nécessaires aux Trésoreries indigènes qui constituaient une pièce essentielle du système d’administration indirecte approuvé par les chefs traditionnels. Ce projet suscita les protestations des « évolués », soutenus par certains Européens, d’autant plus que la crise économique mondiale avait fait tomber le cours des produits. Le gouverneur ayant refusé de tenir compte de ces avertissements, des émeutes populaires éclatèrent à Sekondi et Cape Coast, attribuées par l’administration à des « voyous ». Le gouverneur fut finalement contraint de renoncer à son projet.