

A paradise on the way to being lost

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70 black Bermudans who spent most of their young lives on the fringes of the criminal underworld went to the gallows on Friday last week, the first official execution in the colony for 34 years.

There followed the worst violence since the race riots of 1968. For three days black youths attacked shops, offices, hotels and industrial premises causing damage estimated at £2.5 million. The new Governor, Sir Peter Ramsbotham, declared a state of emergency and at his request British troops were flown in from Belize and from Britain to provide backing for the 100-man police force.

It is the black-white struggle that underlies all the troubles that have beset Bermuda since the governor, Sir Richard Sharples, was murdered in the gardens of his official residence in 1973, as he strolled there with an aide-camp. The aide perished in the fire as well, and so did the governor's favourite dog, a Great Dane. The murder appeared to be political. And within 24 hours the Bermuda Police — largely expatriate white force — had rounded up a dozen men described as black Power leaders, as prime suspects. Later they were quietly released.

When the police finally got their man he turned out to be one of that alarmingly large band of petty criminals who haunt the "Brown towns" of Bermuda. These are the ghettos of black folk that are tucked away neatly out of sight, so as not to

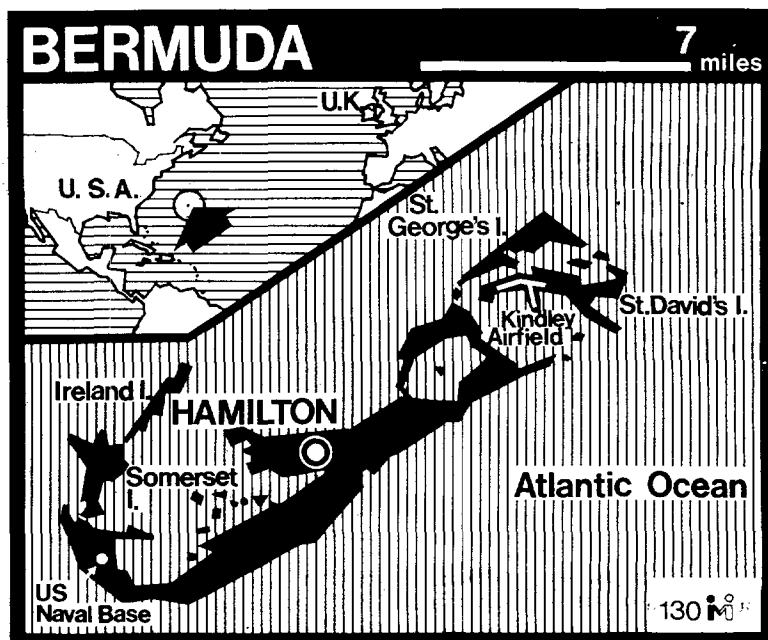
upset the wealthy North American tourists who provide 80 per cent of the territory's income.

The man was Erskine "Buck" Burrows, aged 33, who went to the gallows with his accomplice, Larry Tacklyn. The charges brought against them took in other baffling murders that had brought two senior Scotland Yard officers over and back from London no less than 16 times. One was the killing of a chief of police, George Duckett. Then there was the attack — officially described as armed robbery — at a supermarket, where two men died.

The Progressive Labour Party under its obdurate leader, a black lawyer named Louis Brown-Evans, does not for a moment defend the terrible crimes that have brought these two pathetic creatures to the death cell. Their campaign is directed against the system which tries to maintain a cosmetic appearance that all is well, when the black Bermudans, who constitute two thirds of the population, believe that the dice have been heavily loaded against them. In particular the PLP say that the white minority, headed by a millionaire prime minister, have neatly jerrymantered the constituencies so that they continue to hold two thirds of the seats in parliament, and all the spoils of office.

There's nothing complex about gerrymandering. In an elite constituency-like Paget, the 600 (white) voters smoothly elect four MPs. In Pembroke East, which is black, 2,000

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voters have to be content with electing four MPs also. The wonder is that the PLP has advanced as far as it has — 14 seats in the House against 26 for the United Bermuda Party.

The cosy system of permanent privilege was shaken by the first of a series of riots that broke out in the mid-1960s.

Sir Richard Sharples had not helped matters, when he took over as governor, by adopting the life-style of the white Bermudans. His predecessor, Lord Martonmere, had lavished an extra £30,000 a year on the running of Government House, building an exotic swimming pool in its 15-acre grounds and entertaining in a style that would have been worthy of the Kenya of the Delamere days. Bermuda had developed its own "Happy Valley" set, with the constant affairs,

switching of partners, and bacchanalian banquets.

Sir Richard, unwisely, hit on his own bizarre variant of it all soon after taking office. He gave a birthday party for his Great Dane, Horsa, at Government House, to which were invited all the other Great Danes on the island. There was a huge cake and photos in the local press. And Horsa died in the hail of bullets that killed his master.

The confession by Burrows, read out in court, began by saying he was "the Commander-in-Chief of all the anti-colonialist forces" and went on to talk of his "inspired efforts and determination." At the trial, where he did not speak, he sat holding a Bible throughout.

As it happens, a distinguished black jurist had already identified the source of trouble in Bermuda and predicted what would come unless action were taken. This was the Wooding Commission, back in 1968, dealing with the root causes of earlier race troubles. Sir Hugh Wooding, a British-trained lawyer who became Chief Justice of Trinidad, pointed out that the paradise island had ugly forces bubbling just beneath the surface and called for new policies of racial integration: "Black men and women must be, and must be seen to be, in truly authoritative positions — in government, commerce, the hotel industry, and in the professions."

But very little has been done. The UBP goes its way, the expatriate police keep a firm hand on things, the guns circulate in the brown towns, the resentment builds. Unless Sir Peter can produce a rapid solution it will soon be paradise lost.