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IMPERIALISM AND THE PRACTISING MONOPOLY: PROFESSIONALISATION OF ACCOUNTANTS IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to extend our understanding of the practice and profession of accounting in the context of imperialism in Sri Lanka and to examine how the British Empire influenced the realisation of their interests through the accounting profession during the period 1940 to 1980s in Sri Lanka. Data were gathered via document review, archival data and in-depth informal interview approaches. The theoretical framework is drawn from the theory of imperialism. The findings provide evidence that the UK capital through 'starling companies' continued operating in Sri Lanka to manage the plantation (tea, rubber, coconut) economy. The setting up of the Accountancy Board (1941) by the British was to qualify locals as Registered Accountants to serve in the country. These accountants were marginalized and prevented from practising as auditors by British qualified 'elite' accountants in Sri Lanka. The Institute of Chartered Accountants of Ceylon (Sri Lanka)(ICASL) established in 1959, continued the British dominance of the profession and the gate keeping mechanisms for British accounting bodies and ICASL maintained the British business for the benefit of the imperial center. It shows the existence of imperialism without empire during the period in this study. The unique feature of the Sri Lankan (as a non-settler colony of Britain) accounting profession, when compared with other former British colonies, is that the ICASL has maintained a 'practising monopoly' from its inception to serve the British business interests in Sri Lanka. The issues identified in this paper has practical implications for understanding the nature and changes associated with the accounting profession during the colonial and post-colonial period in Sri Lanka. What is generalisable is an understanding of the processes and mechanisms which relate to the way the accounting profession functions.

Keywords: Accounting profession, imperialism, practising monopoly, registered accountants, Sri Lanka.