

DR. CHEDDI JAGAN D.DS.

PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF GUYANA

by

Billy Strachan

I have been proud and honoured over some near five decades to count Cheddi Jagan as a very personal, close and dear friend. No comment on Cheddi can be made adequately without mention of his long serving wife, Janet. As we are dealing with the immediate family, one has also to mention his son, named after himself, popularly known as Joey, and his daughter, Nadira, a charming and accomplished young lady.

Cheddi and myself first became associated at the turn of 1948 after he had started and participated in the production of a political bulletin published by the Political Affairs Committee in Georgetown. Needless to say, his wife Janet was also one of the indomitable four who set out on that political road.

A remarkable characteristic about Cheddi Jagan was his total lack of pomp and ceremony and his absolute commitment to assisting his less favoured brethren in Guyana. But he took that further because as he developed politically he realised that Guyana's future was tied up with the future of the anglophone Caribbean islands which shared an identical history with that of his beloved homeland.

Cheddi was the eldest of nine surviving children born to a humble sugar worker at Port Mourant, his father and mother Bachonai. Out of that very humble background, Jagan was educated, first locally and then on to the prestigious Queen's College in the then British Guiana.

Queen's College was one of the prestigious schools created by the British colonial masters while they occupied the territories and is equalled by similar colleges in Port of Spain, Trinidad, Barbados with equally three prestigious secondary schools and likewise in the larger Jamaica, with proportionally more such secondary schools.

During World War II Cheddi, who was born on 22nd March 1918, went off to Howard University, Washington D.C., then on to the North Western Dental School of Chicago, meeting up with Janet and forming the base for a career that was to lead finally to the presidency of an independent Guyana.


Recalling that Cheddi qualified as a dentist and in those days was able to earn a relatively remarkable income in relation to his brethren at home but who at no time has ever forgotten his roots. His siblings were always very dear to him. He loved Guyana with an indescribable passion and all the Guyanese people without restriction. He had always moved in wider circles, marrying first his wife, a native of the United States of America, and returning home in 1943 to recognise the vast political division that the occupying forces had created among people of varying racial backgrounds. That wicked division has continued until today and Cheddi Jagan has stood out as the unquestioned healer of the disastrous division which has bedevilled the people of Guyana, particularly more so from immediately prior to independence in 1966 and thereafter.

At first Jagan recognised that the most unifying force was the state of the overwhelming majority of people of any racial background who suffered in the rice growing areas, sugar cane fields or menial jobs in the capital city of Georgetown. He, with his wife's support, threw themselves relentlessly into building the unity of the oppressed workers. He first became treasurer of the then Manpower Citizens' Association which was primarily involved with sugar cane workers, but not so restricted.

We met up, as I have already mentioned, in the 1948/49 period, after I had met Forbes Burnham, another Guyanese, who was at that time President of the West Indian Students' Union in the U.K..

Most politically conscious Caribbean people at that time in the United Kingdom saw no difference based on the territory in which by accident we had been born and so people like Cheddi from Guyana, Michael Manley from Jamaica, Errol Barrow from Barbados, David Pitt or Jack Kelshall from Grenada/Trinidad found no difficulty in uniting under one banner of independence for the Caribbean territories. Independence was achieved but we failed to continue that unity so that we could have an economy that would make, albeit a minor impact on world affairs.

So many leaders of that period and their successors in the Caribbean movement were "successful" in their individual roles but as most would admit today were unsuccessful in achieving the goal we had all aimed for at that time.



It is Cheddi Jagan's integrity, consistency and lack of self-aggrandizement that kept him on that narrow path which ultimately led to his Presidency of Guyana. We cannot forget that for nearly three decades by the connivance of foreign interests and local corrupt politicians Jagan was denied his properly elected place as leader of the people of Guyana.

Time and space do not permit me to go in more depth into our relationship and to deal with the respect I have always had for Cheddi Jagan and now that he has departed us I will continue to have forever.

On Friday 7th March 1997, a Guyana Airways aircraft with more than one hundred and fifty officials and dignitaries from the Government of Guyana landed at Andrews Airfield, Washington to collect the body of the recently deceased President.

On arrival, from the body of persons who went to the U.S.A. a detachment of the Guyana Defence Force presented a twenty-one gun salute in honour of the fallen President. It was a very moving occasion. Then the body was transported home to Georgetown, Guyana with all those who had made the journey to the U.S.A.

On arrival at Timehri Airport the cavalcade drove the long East Bank Road into Georgetown. The road was lined with masses of Guyanese of every conceivable race and mixture thereof. There was a deep note of sadness and the majority, particularly women, shed tears unashamedly for the loss of their great leader.

The body was taken to State House where it has lain in state and will do so until the official ceremony at the Supreme Court Building. On that occasion there will be prayers offered from the three major religious groups in Guyana and other dignitaries. Later, on Monday 10th March, the body will be driven in a special cavalcade past the famous Enmore Martyrs's Memorial and on to Port Mourant. The body will lie in state in Berbice and then, in accordance with the traditions of the people of Berbice, there will be a cremation on the beach.

The most striking memory of this sad incident was the united sorrow expressed by all Guyanese, no matter from which race they sprang, for their great leader. Organisationally, the transition should be smooth and no one anticipates any difficulty for the successor President, Sam Hinds, who has already been sworn in to his post on the morning of 6th March 1997.

Billy Strachan

9.3.97