



Review on arts

Cheddi Jagan's Selected Correspondence

by Eddi Rodney



"I first wanted to be a doctor. Didn't want to be merely a specialist and craftsman and cure individual aches and ills. I wanted to cure ills of society. I want to know that I have served humanity as a human being. All of us want recognition - I am not interested in recognition - conferred in terms of my bank roll. When I would have passed away, I would like it to be recorded that Jagan did his bit in the service of humanity." (C Jagan, 1964)

Just under three decades ago the bestseller author James Baldwin was featured in leading tabloids on both sides of the Atlantic. The avant-garde community in New York, Chelsea and Parisian Left Bank in-crowds, were all claiming Baldwin as "simply the greatest writer ever..." "Objectively though it was a broad based reaction to the Black Revolution that had gripped America during the period of imperialist aggression and war in Vietnam.

The intellectuals on the other hand realized that things could never be the same. If people were to be considered free from oppression then that process had to involve the role of the individual.

Cheddi Jagan's political career, his involvement in international solidarity causes and campaigns have invariably been featured regularly in the country of his birth.

At the same time in terms of publications setting out some kind of 'synthesis' his political ideology, the majority of the collated written material and documentation

concerning Guyana's foremost political leader, has been published in countries other than Guyana.

The exceptions of course, are his articles and mimeoed position papers that were printed in Thunder, Mirror

and locally produced tracts or magazines. These latter would include articles done for the New World group as well as interviews for publications connected to Guyanese Writers and Artists.

The recently launched Cheddi Jagan Selected Correspondence (CJSC) 1953-1965 is a quality proofed (171pp) text.

Edited by Dr Dabydeen of Warwick University, the book's Foreword is written by Janet Jagan. The CJSC is part of a series including 5 other titles. Though not as voluminous as Nadia Jagan-Brancier's Cheddi Jagan: My Fight For Guyana's Freedom (336 pp), the CJSC is quite solid in terms of subject matter and literary content; meaning of necessity political history.

The Initial Impression

A previous book dedicated to Cheddi Jagan and described simply as "The Selected Speeches 1992-1994 (Han sib, London), provided readers with a glimpse of Cheddi Jagan as "the first democratically elected President of Guyana." That edition included all transcripts of Presidential Addresses filed and released through the Guyana Information Agency and the Office of the President. It commences with his "Address To The Nation", on October 26 1992 and not the memorable historical "Oath of Office Swearing-In Address" at State House on Friday, October 9 1992.

The fact that the Letters, Extracts (telegram, radio broadcasts and a smuggled prison note) as well as miscellanea all emerge from the period leading to 1965, is of course crucial to the total project

The Letters themselves illustrate an entire historical period. They include the classified "Secret" letters; which can now be transferred to the "public domain" as more than 30 years have gone by.

So there us that element if we agree on such a term, germane to political science and related events pertaining to 'persons, individuals, institutions and politicized committees actively or otherwise involved in matters' where no violations or infringements of the law ought to occur."

Cheddi Jagan wrote his letters in the same easy to understand style that characterized his public debates. Everything is carefully related to the specific matter being discussed. When he writes to the late Billy Strachan (then head of the Caribbean Labour Congress based in London (28/12/1961), it is to update Strachan on the progress being made towards "establishing a College of Liberal Arts and Sciences" in British Guiana. Evidently seeking to have the best qualified academically based individual for assuming control management of this higher level education 'center', Jagan writes, "While in New York I spoke to Doxey

Willerson, an American Negro who is very enthused with the idea of coming here to help us arrange the College. The only hitch is that he is at present on an assignment to write a book, which will take until about August next year."

The Editor (Dabydeen) offers a professional comment that supports the structure as a cast value-programmed for scholarship. The description that follows speaks for itself:

"The letters collected in this volume - a sample of the thousands of pages penned by Cheddi Jagan - reveal aspects of the character of the man as well as the social and political history of his country. The opening letters from Governor Savage marks the beginning of the country's descent into turmoil. In it he dismisses the democratically elected Jagan and suspends the Constitution. The letter one sentence in length condemns Guyana to many years of social and political unrest. The savagery of the act is couched in the ironically polite language of the colonial ruling class: 'I have the honour to be, Sir, Your obedient servant'. A year later Jagan is jailed and has to resort to writing his thoughts (including a rare poem) on toilet paper, which is smuggled out of his cell to his followers nationwide. Illiteracy and semi-literacy may have been imposed on his parents, but Jagan will not succumb to colonial history."

Articulating Democratic Centralism

Of the Secret Correspondence edited in CJSC those addressed by Prime Minister Jagan to the Police Commissioner (Letter 44) pp 100-107, dealing with "the progressive deterioration of law and order" (1962), and that addressed to the Governor, "expressing concern about the apparent break down of law and order in Georgetown" (Dated 12 June 1963; pp 87-98), offer a definitive insight into the degree of political management Cheddi Jagan and access to.

The language of statecraft obviously was supported by his closest advisers, notably Jack Kelshall and Attorney General Fenton Ramsahoye.

But even more significant, the reader discerns how Cheddi Jagan attempts to initiate a "coalition agreement" with LFS Burnham of the PNC at a time when "civil unrest had severely damaged the Guyanese society." Letters 20-36 denote sequentially, the trend that starts during December of 1962 and continues until July 16 1964. CJ - LFSB: LFSB - CJ the letters; many brief notes, testify to the sharp political struggle that Cheddi Jagan conducted to win Independence for Guyana.

These letters also reveal the arrogance and egoism of LFS Burnham as he realizes that CIA and Imperialist intervention combined would be a much more counter-revolutionary threat than many amongst the progressive strata had believed at the point in 1961 after the PPP had again gained decisive success at General Elections.

CJSC is priced at \$1.50 - the equivalent of 2 bottles of rum.