

# National Unity

May 12, 2018 Features / Columnists, Peeping Tom 0 Comments

This is the final installment in a series which has taken a critical look at the life and legacy of Dr. Cheddi Jagan, whose 100th birth anniversary is being observed this year. This column deals with Cheddi's approach to national unity.

The conversation about national unity has for many years been circuitous and, as a result, has derailed into debates as to which leaders were sincere about national unity.

Sadly, none of those making inputs into these debates have bothered to outline or define their own understanding of what is national unity. This failure has rendered the debates vacuous.

National unity can mean different things to different people. In a multiracial society, it can refer to racial or ethnic unity. Or it can simply refer to a coming together of political parties which straddle a wide range of ideological orientations. National unity can also be said to take place around events. After the 9/11 attacks there was a consensus within the United States that this horrific tragedy had united the American people. That idea of national unity was however a transient phenomenon and represented a collective condemnation of the attacks on the American people and nation.

When Guyana achieved its Independence there was an emotional scene at the National Park where the country's two main political leaders embraced each other. That, too, has been described as a fleeting moment of national unity, as both leaders were united in their desire to have independence.

But that moment passed. The idea of national unity in its common usage does not fit the ideal of national unity which is something more permanent, more substantial, more structured and more ideological.

Cheddi Jagan saw national unity in Marxist terms. National Unity was for him about class unity and foremost about the unity of the working class. Marxists give primacy to economic formations, and for them, race and ethnicity were superstructure categories.

Cheddi was not interested in racial unity in terms of bringing racial groups together. Cheddi was more concerned with the unity of the working class which had been fractured by the split between Burnham and himself. Cheddi was interested in repairing this fracture because for him, this would reunite the working class.

Cheddi tried all manner of talks with Burnham, even meeting secretly with him on the Georgetown Seawall during the turbulent period of the sixties to try to reunite the proletariat class, but to no avail. Burnham's hold on power was too dependent on Western support and he knew that the West would never condone him jumping in bed with Cheddi or, for that matter, reuniting the working class, thus threatening vital expatriate interests in sugar and bauxite at the time.

After Burnham pulled out of talks with the PPP during the period of critical support, Jagan, still keen on reuniting the working class, proposed a National Patriotic Front. This was a two-part proposal: one for a National Patriotic Front and the other a National Patriotic Front Government. The former would

comprise all socialist and anti-imperialist forces in the country. It would unite what the PPP saw as all progressive and revolutionary forces in the country.

The latter, that is the National Patriotic Front Government, would result from a process of democratic elections and would involve an alliance of the working classes and elements of the petit bourgeoisie. It was never intended to be a Russian-styled government.

The WPA interestingly welcomed the suggestion, but did not feel that there should be any place in the National Patriotic Front for the PNC. It later tabled its own proposal for a Government of National Unity and Reconstruction, which was to have strong socialist orientation.

Both of these proposals were never intended to represent a cobbling together of leaders. They were both deeply ideological and included blueprints for structure. Burnham, however, was never interested in anything that he perceived would weaken his already fragile hold on power.

When the PPP was returned to office in 1992, Jagan made it clear that his then coalition with the Civic component represented racial, ethnic and class balance, and was ideologically plural. Jagan insisted on the word 'balance' because he knew that this formation was necessary but not sufficient condition for national unity. National Unity for him, to the end, remained uniting the working class.

Hoyte was never going to be interested in forging such ideological unity. And in any event, that moment for uniting the working class along ideological lines had passed. The world had changed. Communism was on the ropes with the disintegration of the communist bloc in Eastern Europe. Jagan himself was forced just before the 1992 elections to concede that the building of socialism in Guyana was out of the question. He knew that the objective conditions were not present for the reuniting of the working class along ideological lines.

Unfortunately there are forces that raise the question of national unity outside of the notion of class unity. They see it in terms of the ethnic and racial question. Those who today spout national unity should avoid the mistaken notion that somehow bringing a few defectors and putting together faces of differing complexions can lay the basis for a movement towards national unity.

National unity has to be premised on something more substantive, something more ideological. But to get there requires the courage for parties to identify where they stand ideologically.

It is hard to see how parties that are afraid or incapable of defining themselves ideologically can ever aspire to the "substance" that is required for national unity.