

Race was not a factor in Cheddi's opposition to federation

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The Kaieteur News carries a satirical column entitled "Dem Boys Seh" which usually concludes with something which reads "Talk Half, Lef Half."

A recent response to a Peeping Tom column is full of halves – half- truths and half-baked analysis – which sought to advance the proposition that race was a consideration in Cheddi Jagan's stance on Federation of the West Indies. That response suffers from the same defect which has been used to great effect against Cheddi and the PPP in the past – converting a descriptive proposition into a prescriptive one.

Just before he died, Cheddi Jagan was the victim of a horrible piece of distortion of something that Cheddi had said in an overseas address. In that speech, Cheddi had done an analysis of the African condition in the United States just after the War, and had concluded that in terms of economic standing, Blacks were at that time at the lower rung of the social ladder. This description of the objective class conditions was maliciously distorted to infer that Cheddi was ideologically consigning Blacks to the lower rungs of the social ladder. A description of objective conditions was turned into a political prescription.

The controversy which raged over this distortion was a cause of great pain to Cheddi, because he was never a racist. Many believe that this issue contributed to his subsequent heart attack.

In the run-up to the 2015 elections, the now opposition leader, Bharrat Jagdeo described a situation on election morning involving supporters of the PNCR. The descriptive analysis was used against him. He was taken to court on private criminal charges on a charge of exciting racial hostility.

The DPP did not intervene to ask that in the interest of governance, the matter be first reported to the police. The local media, the professed paragons of virtue, made no attempt to confirm whether what Jagdeo described had in fact taken place. He was said to be using race as a political weapon. Description was turned into prescription.

Interestingly, not long before, a social commentator and political leader had rebuked the people of Buxton for welcoming Jagdeo when he visited that village. No one accused that commentator and political leader of inciting racial disaffection or hostility.

These are the dangers when descriptions are spun into prescriptions. The same thing is happening today in relation to Cheddi's position on federation.

In his 1956 speech to the Congress of the PPPC, Cheddi Jagan dealt exhaustively with the question of federation. In that speech, he analyzed the motivations of the British in proposing federation, and he examined the objective conditions, as he saw it, in relation to the support for federation. He also outlined his own position on federation and why he felt it should only be pursued under either independence or dominion status.

It is beyond the scope of this column to go into details about those reasons. In the interest of completeness, this will be done in a forthcoming column, since most of the concerns over federation are the same concerns which are being expressed over the Caribbean Single Market and Economy.

In Cheddi's view, 100% of the East Indians in Guyana were opposed to federation. This has been taken to mean that Cheddi's opposition to federation was based on this race.

It is an invalid argument because it implies that because Indians were believed to be opposed to federation, and because the PPPC draws the bulk of its support from Indians, Cheddi's opposition to federation was based on race. This is clearly an invalid argument because Cheddi clearly outlined the grounds upon which he was opposed to federation.

At that Congress, Cheddi proposed the country's support for federation based on dominion status for the federation and self-government for individual units, but subject to a referendum. Incidentally, it was a rejection via a referendum by the people of Jamaica which ended the federal dream.

What is interesting is that those who accuse Cheddi of factoring race into his decision do not acknowledge – as part of their half-truths – that in his 1956 Congress speech, he also indicated that 40% of Africans did not support federation. No one makes the argument that the other 60% were doing so because of race. But Cheddi's description of 100% Indian opposition is used to argue that race was a factor in his opposition to federation.

So why is this invalid argument being made. It is being made to support a narrative within the WPA. That narrative is that it was federation which was the straw which broke the camel's back of ultra-left within the then PPP, and it was this issue of federation which caused the parting of ways between a political elder and the PPP. But that narrative is also a half-truth which needs to be debunked.