

'The Brightest Star Has Been Extinguished'

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Leader of the House

The brightest light in our political, social and economic firmament has been extinguished. Death intervened on March 6 and took from us our beloved President Cheddi Jagan. Dr Jagan, an integral part of our history, moved amongst us and touched us deeply. While his mortal coil will be shortly consumed, his great and unequalled contribution to this country will remain indelibly imprinted in our hearts and minds.

So much has been said by so many during the last few days in tribute to our late President. We have read and we have heard, from not only among our own people but from those afar and nearer of his humility, his integrity, his eminence, his political status and his exemplary leadership. He has been described as a humanist; as a consistent and tenacious fighter for Peace, for Freedom, for political and Economic Independence and for Caribbean and Third World Integration with the ultimate objective of social justice; as a man of the People, for the People, espousing and championing the cause of the underprivileged; as a great and charismatic leader; as a profound thinker; as a revolutionary; as one of the world's greatest statesmen and accomplished politician; as a creative genius and a nation builder; as a hero, a guide, a teacher; a friend and a protector; as the greatest of the wisest of the strong, possessed of an indomitable spirit, unflinching purpose of mind and indefatigable mental and physical energy and even more recently, as a Mahatma. While that list is by no means exhausted, I would wish to speak, though not at length, mainly, if not wholly, on his life as a Parliamentarian.

Cheddi Jagan entered the Legislative Council in 1947 at the comparatively young age of 29 years. He successfully contested the Central Demerara Constituency under a limited constitution. Cheddi Jagan, a man of great vision, immediately initiated a debate for Universal Adult Suffrage and succeeded in removing the inhibition on



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voting rights. This was a hallmark achievement for electoral democracy. His contributions in the 1947 Legislature filled volumes with constructive proposals and ideas for the development of this country. It was often said that his was a voice in the wilderness, but he proved by his vibrant speeches that he possessed great power of persuasion and was introducing a new political culture in the fabric of the body politic of this country.

Cheddi Jagan changed the tone of passivity which dominated the Council. Jagan's presence in the Legislature, did not inhibit his interaction with the wider population of the country, taking the Parliament, so to speak, to the inhabitants and drawing his strength from them to effectively represent their cause and to change oppressive conditions in the then British Guiana. It is significant to note that Comrade Cheddi in his victory speech after the 1947 election declared:

"We, the people, have won. Now the struggle will begin."

Cheddi Jagan became leader of the PPP, contested the 1953 elections held under universal adult suffrage and won 18 of the 24 seats in the House of Assembly. He became the country's Chief Minister and assumed the responsibility for agriculture, forests, lands and mines. The Government lasted 133 days. The suspension of the Constitution did not deter Dr Jagan, instead it strengthened his pursuit to free this country.

The People's Progressive Party again won the election in 1957 and his portfolio this time was that of Trade and Industry. Dr Jagan continued his Legislative work with even greater resolve to achieve constitutional reform which led to internal Self Government in 1961.

The PPP again won the overall majority in 1961 and Dr Jagan became the first Premier of this country, then British Guiana. The Assembly was effectively used to promulgate Legislative measures which enhanced the well-being and welfare of workers and indeed all Guyanese. In this context, the famous Labour Relations Bill will be remembered. This Bill again demonstrates the progressive thinking of our late President.

The 1964 Constitution which introduced Proportional Representation was vigorously opposed by the PPP leader since Cheddi Jagan subscribed to the view that the 'first past the post' system facilitated fuller and direct representation of constituents.

During his parliamentary life Cheddi Jagan served on both sides of the House and his contributions were always informed, decisive and innovative. In 1966, upon Guyana attaining Independence, he was designated Guyana's first Leader of the Opposition. Dr Jagan continued in that office which was subsequently renamed Minority Leader until 1992 when free and fair elections were held.

Parliament derives its authority from the electoral process and when that process becomes flawed and does not reflect the will of the electorate, Parliament ceases to be truly representative.

This was the situation between 1968 and 1992. It was the most turbulent parliamentary period in our history. Notwithstanding, Cheddi Jagan showed remarkable skills and determination to battle the issues of the day in this forum and used it to sensitise the nation, in some instances in a very dramatic way.

His aggressive advocacy to reverse undemocratic and unilateral interventions alien to parliamentary norms led to the people's leader being muzzled for almost four years. Indomitable and courageous Jagan defied the odds and vehemently insisted on his Constitutional right to address the National Assembly. He spared no opportunity to intervene and represent the rights of the electorate. On one occasion,

in flagrant disregard for the standing orders, a contemptuous attempt was made to prevent him from voting. I recall vividly my own intervention on a point of privilege and relying on established authority, successfully argued that this veteran Parliamentarian was entitled to have his vote recorded. Characteristically, Dr. Jagan refused to acquiesce to any imposition which he was convinced was unjust and wrong.

The People's Progressive Party/Civic won the free and fair general elections held in October 1992. With the restoration of democracy, Dr Jagan was sworn-in as President of our Co-operative Republic and faithfully served the Guyanese nation in that capacity until his death.

Dr. Jagan repeatedly acknowledged Parliament as the central, and paramount legislative authority of this country with matters of national interest being foremost on the agenda. Indeed his unswerving dedication to the Electoral and Parliamentary process was reiterated in his opening address of this Parliament where he emphasised that for Parliament to carry out its functions effectively, it must be a truly deliberative body with a strong Committee system to facilitate issues being fully ventilated. Not only has Dr. Jagan centralised all Parliamentary matters but he has demonstrated in practical terms the urgent need to have Hansard's prepared and printed and distributed. He supported the establishment of a Parliamentary library which is already in process.

Dr. Jagan is the longest-serving Parliamentarian in Guyana, in the Caribbean and perhaps in the Commonwealth and other Parliaments of the world. His contributions in Parliament is unparalleled — having made the greatest number of Motions and raised the greatest number of matters prominent among which is the Independence of Guyana. A keen Parliamentarian, Dr. Jagan's ability to debate the most complex issues, his inherent capacity to fight and surmount adversity, his undaunting spirit, his incredible optimism and contagious zeal and enthusiasm are truly remarkable and shall remain indelible in our minds as they inspire us to greater heights, hopes and aspirations.

Dr. Jagan celebrates 50 years as a Member of Parliament this year. Cheddi Jagan's Parliamentary life and work, influence and accomplishment, of which a full assessment may not be possible till many years hereafter, will impact on Guyana, the Caribbean and the world at large.

The corridors of our Parliament shall no longer be traversed by this patriot and hero. Cheddi Jagan will be greatly missed but will be long remembered for his sterling contributions to the development of our Parliament, our People and our country. We wish Cheddi Jagan a historic and memorable 50th anniversary as a Parliamentarian.