

Comrades and friends all; good morning!

Please permit me to thank the organizers of today's event for this opportunity to reflect on some of my interactions and impressions of the founding father of the People's Progressive Party, and the champion of our democracy.

Cde Cheddi Jagan inspired my early exposure to politics and was instrumental in my involvement in the anti-colonial struggle of our party. His teachings and encouragement have motivated me since those days.

But how did all this start? Brindley or BH, my late husband, came home one night after attending a public meeting at John and Norton Streets where Cde Cheddi was the main speaker. This was early 1953 and Robeson, our eldest son was a few months old.

Cde. Cheddi made a tremendous impression on BH who, from his earlier experiences working in Kwakwani at the bauxite company, was already expressing concern about workers' welfare. He attended more public meetings and became more determined to address these issues to the extent that he had a few encounters with his employer, the late Richard Ishmael, Principal of the Indian Education Trust College. He resigned from his teaching job at the college and joined the PPP. I joined as well.

At that time – 1953 - our country was preparing for general elections. These were the elections where universal adult suffrage was recognized and 18 year old citizens became eligible to vote for the first time.

Our party gained wide appeal during the elections campaign and attracted women and a wide-cross section of workers at our country-wide meetings. I recall fondly, that some nights after public meetings, Cde Cheddi would take us to Brown Betty, a popular snackette downtown, for ice-cream sodas. There was fantastic enthusiasm among our comrades who rallied around Cdes Cheddi and Janet, and worked hard in engaging more persons to join our party and to sell our party's newspapers. These were exciting times which not only opened our consciousness to the challenges of our Guyanese sisters and brothers, but also to the plight of especially the poor and downtrodden in countries across the world.

On Election Day in 1953, I was the poll clerk for Cde Ashton Chase who was our party's contestant for the South Georgetown constituency. I reflect with amusement now, that I had to organise with other comrades to take breaks so that I could go over to our home in Evans Street to breastfeed my baby. That child now serves our party and country as the Minister of Home Affairs. *(Is Robeson here with us?)*

Cde Cheddi and Cde Janet were eager for us to take the struggle for women's emancipation seriously. Our activism saw the formation of the Women's Section of the PPP, which later became the WPEO and later, the Women's Progressive Organization, the WPO.

I was elected and served as President of the WPO for several years and benefitted from the mentorship and support of Cde Cheddi throughout. He encouraged us to build courage in facing

the challenges of the times, and to study political economy. He urged us to follow international political economic and social situations and to speak out against things that were unjust.

I can attest that Cde Cheddi was especially caring towards the welfare of comrades and of people across all walks of life. He helped to embolden us to represent those who suffered at the hands of our detractors and the oppressors.

As our nation's President, Cde. Cheddi visited Ottawa, Canada in 1996 during BH's tenure as Guyana's High Commissioner to Canada. We enjoyed reminiscing about our experiences, our successes and challenges, during the 'early years'. I recall vividly him saying to BH and me that despite our hard struggle over the years, history was on our side and that we must "keep up the fight". Little did we know that that would have been our last conversation.

Cde Cheddi was always engaging and concerned about what we could do to improve the socio-economic conditions and freedoms of people everywhere.

Cde Cheddi was very stoic in his stance for our freedoms despite all sorts of harassment and lies. After the suspension of the constitution he was told there would be a period of "marking time" by the then Governor who cynically added marking time is not standing still.

I take courage from his enduring legacy of humility, integrity and honesty. And I am hopeful that his fighting spirit to represent and improve the welfare our people, would live on in our party, the PPP. His landmark proposal in his late years for a New Global Human Order must further inspire us to solidify our efforts with compatriots for a better Guyana and a just world.

Let us continue to build on this solid and remarkable foundation that Cde Cheddi and Cde Janet laid for us. Let us do our utmost to ensure Peace, Progress and Prosperity for our party and for our dear country.

Long live the legacy of Cde Cheddi!

I thank you.

**Patricia Benn**

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