

# Political Resistance to the Birth of the University of Guyana

by Prem Misir

The month of March is former President Cheddi Jagan's month. And so today, I want to talk about his contribution to the establishment of the University of Guyana (UG); and the accompanying resistance it attracted.

As we review the birth of UG, let us see Jagan as the patron of UG. As we peruse this country's history holistically and objectively, there is no question that Jagan, without a doubt, is the father of this nation. The Mayor of Georgetown is wrong on this score!

The presence of the University of Guyana (UG) today is a product of Dr. Cheddi Jagan's guiding light and resoluteness; and a remarkable testimony to the heroic people who stood their ground to ensure that the University continues to have breadth and to be of high degree.

The history of UG's conception and early years acknowledges significant political resistance to its existence. However, these early years saw an evolving UG as the wellspring of education amid serious political turmoil. Just focus on 1963 to assess the political resistance against UG.

Former PPP Minister of Education Vernon Nunes on-September 29, 1961, established a Working Party on the feasibility of setting up a local University. A University was possible. Nunes then submitted a document for Cabinet consideration on December 6, 1961, gaining approval. The University of Guyana Ordinance was approved by the Senate on March 18, 1963 and by the Legislative Assembly on April 5, 1963. Governor Sir Ralph Grey signed the Bill into law on April 18, 1963. The University of Guyana's inauguration was held on October 1, 1963. Classes started at UG on October 2, 1963.

Once Cabinet approved the proposal for the establishment of a University on December 6, 1961, Jagan rolled out intensive communications with academics abroad to assist him in this needed project. A few examples of his indefatigable efforts to make university education a reality in Guyana will suffice.

Letters

January 4, 1962: Jagan wrote to Harold Drayton in Ghana requesting his assistance.

January 13, 1962: Drayton responded that he would like to return to Guyana immediately, as the University of Ghana was willing to release him quicker by not applying the customary three months.

December 17, 1962: Jagan asked Horace Davis whether it would be possible to recruit lecturers in 23 fields.

January 2, 1963: Horace Davis replied by indicating that both Professor Alan MacEwan and he would like to work in British Guiana (now Guyana). He believed that a two or three-year budget would assist in attracting staff. On the question of the library, Davis advised that Jagan should establish a committee for staff recruitment, equipment and building, and to appeal for entire libraries from deceased scholars or moribund institutions.

January 10, 1963: Jagan wrote to Professor Paul Baran of Stanford University, Professor Joan Robinson, Cambridge University, Professor Lancelot Hogben, Birmingham University, and Professor David Glass, University of London. Jagan's letter was a request for assistance in staff recruitment. In this letter, Jagan also outlined the university's role; he suggested that the university should strive to develop the community through producing graduates for the civil service, teachers for high schools, and scientists and technologists for industrial and agricultural development. Jagan advocated too that the university should administer action-oriented research into Guyana's problems.

January 10, 1963: Jagan wrote to Felix Cummings in New York asking him to mobilize funds for a library and laboratory equipment. Jagan also indicated that they were attempting to have Joan Robinson of Cambridge University as the first Vice-Chancellor.

February 2, 1963: Lancelot Hogben replied accepting the position of Vice-Chancellor.

March 1, 1963: Jagan thanked Hogben for accepting the Vice-Chancellorship, and invited him to make a preparatory visit on March 18, 1963.

Professor Harold Drayton, first Deputy Vice Chancellor of UG, in *The University of Guyana Perspectives on the early History*, noted that in the months leading up to the university's inauguration and especially in the first year of UG's life, many local and regional newspapers, and some U.S. respectable journals, frequently published items unfavorable to the proposed national University, referring to it disapprovingly as Jagan's 'night school'; and that it was a training ground for communist activists.

Drayton also noticed in early 1963 that some senior Education Officers in cahoots with the Permanent Secretary within the Ministry of Education wrote disapprovingly of the proposed national University. And their paper was presented in tandem with the Ministry's White Paper on Higher Education to the Senate and Legislative Assembly.

These diversions to negatively impact the University's development followed and in some cases accompanied direct political resistance, aimed at removing the PPP Government in 1963; those actions to shelve the UG's growth and to dispose of the PPP from office in 1963 had a nexus. Keep in mind that UG commenced classes on October 2, 1963.

And while these dastardly oppositional acts could be misconstrued as having nothing to do with the proposed national University, the actions even latently were intended to rob the Government and a colonial people of any credibility and innovativeness associated with the founding of an institution of higher education; quite clearly, the principles of integrity and creativity in institution building certainly would enhance the stature of any Government; and further such improved eminence, indeed, would undermine any Opposition's intent to overthrow an Administration.

And in this case, the Opposition PNC's 'X-13' plan craved such intentions of ousting the Government; but UG as a reality saddened the PNC's illegal efforts. So let's present some actions relating to the nexus alluded to earlier.

A Police raid on Congress Place, Headquarters of the PNC, in May 1963, found large quantities of weapons and a document outlining the 'X-13' terrorist plan; the plan clearly indicated that the PNC possessed a road map to violently remove the democratically-elected PPP Government. And those today who believe that there was nothing to the X-13 Plan, then let the media carry it, so the people may decide for themselves.

Later, the Police developed a research document on the PNC as a terrorist organization, but Governor Sir Ralph Grey refused to make it public; however, Janet Jagan was able to secure this document and made its contents available to the public in early 1964, almost a year after the police found the PNC's 'X-13' plan.

These early months in the evolution of UG saw serious developmental constraints produced by the 80 days' general strike from April 18 through July 8, 1963, the declaration of a State of Emergency on May 9, rioting, bombing and arson, and racial attacks on person and property.

June 12, 1963 recorded the beating of PPP Minister of Education Vernon Nunes; then there was Premier Cheddi Jagan's narrow escape from a similar fate when he left the Public Buildings with his two bodyguards and Superintendent Carl Austin; a mob stoned and surrounded Jagan's car; Austin and the bodyguards then opened gunfire, at which time, the driver maneuvered a quick exit. Also, quite a few Government Ministries and buildings suffered bombings from June 11 through June 25, 1963.

During this same month of June 1963 in England, the London's Public Record Office (June 30, 1963) carried a document showing a meeting between President John Kennedy and Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, where they both agreed to amend the Constitution of British Guiana to provide for a new electoral system — Proportional Representation (PR), in order to remove Dr. Cheddi Jagan from office. Note that Burnham and D'Aguiar, four months later, proposed PR at the Independence Conference of October 22, 1963.

After the talks failed, Colonial Secretary Duncan Sandys then acquired political space to institute PR in British Guiana. The country held its General Elections on December 7, 1964 and established the PNC/UF coalition Government. All these indecent goings-on during the PPP Administration in 1963 and 1964 did not block the establishment of UG.

The PNC-UF Coalition Government in 1964 exhibited enormous indifference to UG, and pursued severally the reintegration of UG with the University of the West Indies (UWI).

And a few years later, according to the then Vice Chancellor Dr. Dennis Irvine, the PNC Government, after ridding itself of the UF, established a committee, that included a well-known senior UG staff, to determining the course of action for effecting this reintegration, aimed at ending UG as a Jagan-created institution.

Dr. Irvine claimed that through his valid standpoints and a threat to resign, he convinced then Prime Minister Burnham to throw out this quest to bring an end to UG as a university institution.

And so, UG became firmly established, notwithstanding all this nastiness. Clearly, Jagan was the founder of the University of Guyana. And all brochures of this University need to prominently acknowledge this fact.

## UNIVERSITY OF GUYANA GUILD OF GRADUATES, ONTARIO

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October 20, 2009

Ms. Nadira Jagan-Brancier  
55 Ontario Street South  
Milton ON L9T 2M3



Dear Ms. Jagan-Brancier:

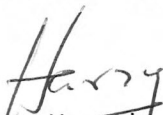
Greetings.

I am pleased to forward you the enclosed brochure of the 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Dinner and Dance of the University of Guyana Guild of Graduates, Ontario, and a copy of our News Release that was carried by the Guyana Chronicle. If I may, I wish to draw your attention to the centre pages of the brochure which are dedicated to your late mother.

The keynote speaker for our event this year was Dr. Richard Drayton, Rhodes Professor of Imperial History at King's College London. Unfortunately, he had a last minute emergency and could not attend. As a result, his speech was delivered by his father, Dr. Harold Drayton. In his preamble to Richard's address, he made a profound statement on your father's role in establishing the University. I enclose a copy for your records.

Please note that a similar package is being sent to the Cheddi Jagan Research Centre in Guyana.

Regards and best wishes.



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Encl.

## ANOTHER SUCCESSFUL UG GUILD'S DINNER & DANCE

A large cross section of the Guyanese community got together last Saturday, October 3, at the York Banquet Hall in Toronto for the 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Dinner and Dance of the University of Guyana Guild of Graduates, Ontario (UGGGO). Attendees included Guyana's Consul General Mr. Danny Doobay, Associate Professor of Women and Gender Studies and Director of Caribbean Studies at the University of Toronto Dr. Alissa Trotz, and First Deputy Vice Chancellor of the UG (1963-64), Dr. Harold Drayton, who flew in from the USA for the occasion.

In his opening address, Harry Hergash, President of the UGGGO, remarked "Although we have been holding this annual dinner/dance for seventeen years now and it is considered one of the established social events in the Guyanese community, we started out doing this as a fund raising event to benefit students at the UG. Now, each year, around ten students at the University of Guyana receive a financial award from the funds we have invested in our former homeland. We have always focused on the students because we see them as the primary stakeholders and key assets of the University."

Mr. Hergash continued "... In the early nineties members of the UGGGO were privileged to be part of a group that lobbied and saw the signing of an agreement between the University of Guyana and two Ontario universities -York University and the University of Windsor. As a result of the agreement between the UG and York, three third year students from Guyana are now pursuing studies for one semester at York." The students, Jamal Goodluck, Tricia Teekah and Lauriann Henry, were special guests at the event and each was presented with a copy of the book on the early history of the university that was published by the Ontario Guild some years ago.

The keynote speaker for the evening, Rhodes Professor of Imperial History at King's College London, UK, Dr. Richard Drayton, had a last minute family emergency and could not attend. However, his excellent presentation was delivered eloquently by his father Dr. Harold Drayton who was choked with emotions at times as he read his son's recollections of his early childhood years in Guyana at the University's temporary home at Queen's College, and his visits later on, to the new University campus at Turkeyen. As a matter of fact, Dr. Drayton said, "I learned to love universities and to want to be an academic from my years in and around UG".

Dr. Drayton's central theme was the contributions that UG alumni and others in the diaspora could make, through the use of their knowledge, skills and creative powers to assist in the optimization of human development in our homeland. "Your greatest debt to UG", Dr. Drayton said, "is not the professional qualifications which allowed you to begin the road which led to your achievements in Canada, but that privileged time when you were asked to take knowledge and thinking as the most important thing in the world. For the point of UG was that it invited you to take your mental powers seriously, to believe that you could be more than whatever you

had been and more, not in terms of wealth but of consciousness". Perhaps one ideal target for overseas UG alumni could be "to create at UG some hi-tech, hi-speed internet facility" which would allow for conversations with the diaspora, and specifically for the presentation of lectures and seminars to UG undergraduate and post-graduate students, and later on to make it available to anyone in Guyana with a digital connection. In closing, Dr. Drayton alluded to the unique character of Guyana as "the first human community where all the ancestral traditions of mankind- African, Asian, European, Amerindian- came into encounter.....it is just the early dawn of that civilisation."

In his preamble to Richard's address, Dr. Harold Drayton who was the person entrusted with the task of setting up the University in 1963 stated that his principal remit for this October Reunion in 2009- some four decades later- was to read the address which his son had so wanted to deliver in person. But he hoped that Harry Hergash and other former students and now his very good friends, if not real family, would not mind if he made just one personal comment. "Much as I enjoy all the many flattering tributes you always shower me with, I want to confirm tonight what I have always acknowledged: despite the hard work of all those of us who were involved with the University project, it was Cheddi Jagan who was the unfaltering political sponsor of UG. And now that I am busily engaged in looking in detail, especially at the records of 1962, I can tonight sharpen that assessment. Had it not been for Cheddi's steadfastness, in firmly resisting those who *as late as December 1962* made their last attempt to reverse the decision to establish an autonomous Guyanese institution for Higher Education and Research, UG would almost certainly never have come into being. That is our History.