

The PPP and universal adult suffrage

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In May 2015, many young Guyanese voted for the first time in general elections. It must have been quite an experience for them to have had a say in their country's future by voting for the party of their choice.

Many of them would have taken for granted the right they exercised at the polls. Little did they know that this right of adult suffrage was only acquired after great agitation.

The call for universal adult suffrage – the right of every adult person to exercise their franchise – was being advocated long before 1953 when the first elections under universal adult suffrage were held in Guyana.

The call for universal adult suffrage was also being made long before 1920 when it was supported by Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow.

But while there was a long history of demands for universal adult suffrage, it was the forerunner to the People's Progressive Party, the Political Affairs Committee (PAC) that took the agitation to a level where it could no longer be ignored.

It was primarily because of the efforts of the founders of the PAC – Cheddi Jagan, Janet Jagan, Ashton Chase and Jocelyn Hubbard – that Guyana was able to achieve universal adult suffrage. Without the PPP there would have been no adult universal suffrage. They led the struggle and they saw it through to the end.

Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow, a labour leader in Guyana did, in the 1920's, advocate for universal adult suffrage. At the time, the right to vote depended on owning property, your income and your education.

But in a shameless display, Critchlow made an about face in 1944. Sitting in the Legislative Assembly, he sided with the plantocracy and changed his mind about universal adult suffrage, seeing it as dangerous to allow Indians to exercise their franchise.

The so-called father of trade unionism had fallen victim to ethnic insecurity and had reversed from his earlier position supporting universal adult suffrage.

By the time the PAC was formed, Critchlow had already backpedaled in his support for universal adult suffrage.

It was therefore left up to the PAC and later, the PPP, to revive the struggle for universal adult suffrage. This they did. Indeed the call for universal adult suffrage became one of their main political demands.

The PAC kept up the pressure insisting on a new constitution with guarantees of universal adult suffrage. They kept the issue alive and thus forced another debate in the Legislative Council in 1948.

During that debate, Cheddi Jagan argued forcibly for universal adult suffrage, but he was defeated. Despite this, the struggle continued and in 1950 when the PPP succeeded the PAC, it sent out a petition calling again for universal adult suffrage.

As a result of this pressure, the Waddington Commission in 1951 recommended universal adult suffrage. This was a major victory for the working class and for all Guyana. And the PPP deserves full credit for this victory.

Critchlow's political career had by then ended in disgrace after his victory in legislative elections was annulled because of an unsavory and most despicable tactic employed during the elections. He spent the remainder of his years in poverty and abandoned by organized labour. He was however not entirely forgotten.

Among those who still remembered his contributions to labour and to trade unionism were Dr. Cheddi Jagan and his wife Janet. The latter reminisced on her contacts with him in an article entitled 'Remembering H. N Critchlow'. In that article she wrote:

"I also remember an incident that took place some years later, in the 50s I believe, when Dr. Jagan and I were involved in a May Day March. As we progressed through the city, going through Alberttown, we saw Mr. Critchlow standing at his gate, watching the parade.

"My husband broke ranks and walked over to the gate and spoke to Critchlow using his fond nickname of 'Skipper'. It seems that the TUC had not invited him to the May Day parade and he was left out.

"Cheddi put his arm around Critchlow's shoulder and said, "Come along. You belong in this march."

"Cheddi and Critchlow went to the front of the march and thus Critchlow, maybe for the last time, took part in the traditional May Day parade."

She also recalled when in the 1960s, just before he was booted out of power, Cheddi commissioned someone to sculpt a statue of Critchlow. The statue is now located on the grounds of Parliament Buildings.

She noted, however, that this tribute was shunned by the trade unions who refused to recognize it and who were abusive to the artist, one Mr. Burrowes.

The contributions of Cheddi and Janet Jagan to the achievement of universal adult suffrage cannot be erased from our country's history, because it is now a right.

Those who exercised the right to vote do so because of the struggles of the PPP and its political forerunner, the Political Affairs Committee.