

Cheddi Jagan Memorial Service 25th May 1997

Remarks by Billy Strachan

Mr. Chairman, Your Excellencies, etc,

I was extremely honoured and indeed flattered to be asked to make comments on what I knew of Dr. Cheddi Jagan's life as a personal friend of his and his family for the past forty or so years.

I first encountered, or preferably, learned about the existence of Cheddi Jagan by receiving a copy of the P.A.C. Bulletin at the turn of 1947/48. A young student in London from Guyana, Forbes Burnham, (known fondly as Odo) and myself discussed the fact that such an amazing bulletin, clearly backed by Marxist thought, should come out of Guyana at this time. Burnham and I discussed the possibilities of groups of Caribbean people at home in their territories meeting together and exchanging views with a view to the independence of our individual territories. May I say, that we did think as Caribbean people, seeing no distinctions at the borders of the territories across the Caribbean up on to the mainland of Central America and South America, which had been controlled by Britain. That is, the imperialist Britain, which not only dominated the Caribbean area but vast stretches of Africa, Malaya and, up until recently, the sub-continent of India.

Burnham at that time had nearly or had recently completed his studies as a lawyer and was due to return to Guyana. We were so inspired that we talked about building a political party based on the thinking of the P.A.C. Bulletin and so we introduced ourselves in writing to Cheddi Jagan.

At this time I had already, with the authority of the Caribbean Labour Congress, set up the LONDON BRANCH of that nationalist organisation in London.

As Burnham was returning home to practise as a lawyer and I had recently returned from Jamaica to settle in London, I regarded it as my duty to assist in the building of any party formed along these lines in the then British Guiana and to assist any other then like minded party in the Caribbean, for example, the P.N.P. in Jamaica or the Antigua Labour Party or the Barbados Labour Party or the St. Kitts and Nevis Labour Party. At that time there was no comparable party in Trinidad because unfortunately the WEST INDIAN NATIONAL PARTY under the leadership of David Pitt and Pat Solomon had failed to reach fruition. Eric Williams' People's National Movement had not yet made its mark on the Caribbean scene.

It was not long before Cheddi and I were corresponding in connection with the setting up of a political party in British Guiana ultimately to be known as the PEOPLE'S PROGRESSIVE PARTY of that territory.

So that was the commencement of a period of close association between Cheddi, his family and myself which climaxed with my wife, Mary Jayne and myself staying as guests of Cheddi, as President of Guyana in 1994 and more latterly in 1996.

I have been proud therefore and honoured over some near five decades to count Cheddi Jagan as a very personal, close and dear friend. No comment on Cheddi can be made adequately without mention of his long serving wife, Janet. As we are dealing with the immediate family, one has also to mention his son, named after himself, popularly known as Joey, and his daughter, Nadira, a charming and accomplished young lady.

A remarkable characteristic about Cheddi Jagan was his total lack of pomp and ceremony and his absolute commitment to assisting his less favoured brethren in Guyana.

a relatively remarkable income in relation to his brethren at home, at no time did he ever forget his roots. His siblings were always very dear to him. He loved Guyana with an indescribable passion and all the Guyanese people without restriction. He had always moved in wider circles, marrying first his wife, a native of the United States of America, and returning home in 1943 to recognise the vast political division that the occupying forces had created among people of varying racial backgrounds.

That wicked division has continued until today and Cheddi Jagan has stood out as the unquestioned healer of the disastrous division which has bedevilled the people of Guyana, particularly more so from immediately prior to independence in 1966 and thereafter.

At first Jagan recognised that the most unifying force was the state of the overwhelming majority of people of any racial background who suffered in the rice growing areas, sugar cane fields or menial jobs in the capital city of Georgetown. He, with his wife's support, threw themselves relentlessly into building the unity of the oppressed workers. He first became treasurer of the then Manpower Citizens' Association which was primarily involved with sugar cane workers, but not so restricted.

Most politically-conscious Caribbean people at that time in the United Kingdom saw no difference based on the territory in which by accident we had been born, shipped or transported, and so people like Cheddi from Guyana, Michael Manley from Jamaica, Errol Barrow from Barbados, David Pitt or Jack Kelshall from Grenada/Trinidad found no difficulty in uniting under one banner of independence for the Caribbean territories. Independence was achieved but we failed to continue that unity so that we could have an economy that would make, albeit a minor impact on world affairs.

So many leaders of that period and their successors in the Caribbean movement were "successful" in their individual roles but as most would admit today were unsuccessful in achieving the goal we had all aimed for at that time.

In order to explain the personal and political relationship which developed over the last near-50 years between Cheddi Jagan and myself, a substantial measure can be traced to the Caribbean Labour Congress, now defunct in the Caribbean.

The C.L.C. was an organisation uniting all the people of the anglophone Caribbean and in fact dated back to the 1920s. On another occasion we could deal with the development and subsequent demise of that organisation, but it is only necessary here to show the relationship of that body with the consistency that we have now learned to admire in Cheddi Jagan. After the last Congress in Jamaica in 1947, I had returned to London with the authority to set up among Caribbean people here a London Branch. I was elected Secretary of the London Branch and assumed all the duties of being a representative in London of all the territories in the Caribbean which were seeking national independence. We of course were all voluntary and had to maintain ourselves by a earning a living in the ordinary market place. Members of the London Branch included people like the now deceased Lord Constantine and his fellow peer Lord Pitt of Hampstead (Grenada). Whenever any representation was to be made primarily to the British Government, our London Branch undertook that responsibility. Among the personalities that I personally entertained was one Grantley Adams, who was then President of the Barbados Labour Party; and then there was Vere Bird, who was then President of the Antigua Labour Party and purely to include another representative there was Robert Bradshaw of St. Kitts-Nevis. Indeed we were truly Caribbean and our greatest strength in London sprang not only from the work of Richard Hart the Secretary in Jamaica but equally of Dr. Cheddi Jagan of then British Guiana.

So much water has flowed under the bridge, and Cheddi Jagan was the only leader of his country's independence movement who was treated so disgracefully by the British Government of the day, in alliance with the United States of America and also some willing agents from the Caribbean.

Many of you may be well aware of this potted history, but ^{it} is timely today when people like Mobuto are exposed in the Congo to show how selected individuals were chosen to campaign in their own countries against bona fide national independence movements. Bona fide independence movements had wanted a clean break from the occupation of their territories primarily by the British. Then there were the Duvaliers in Haiti; or Marcos in the Philipines.

In context, I am sure we all appreciate that those events occurred in the post-World War II era, when national independence was the order of the day.

Anyone who wishes to acquaint themselves fully with the life and work of Cheddi Jagan will no doubt research the scores of pamphlets that he produced in support of national independence. His three main published works FORBIDDEN FREEDOM, THE WEST ON TRIAL and THE CARIBBEAN - WHOSE BACK YARD?

It is of interest here for me to recall that when THE WEST ON TRIAL was to be published in 1966 by MICHAEL JOSEPH, I was asked to supervise the production and approve or otherwise the format of the work and its presentation. This was a task I undertook with alacrity and pleasure and today I treasure the written letters of appreciation I received from Dr. Jagan.

This is a sad occasion for me after all the years that Cheddi and I worked closely together for the independence and benefit of our own Caribbean region. In closing I am happy to adopt the words of the Minister of Home Affairs of Guyana at the recent funeral ceremony of President Jagan on March 10th 1997

"Moreover, he imbued his Party with revolutionary theory, recognising that in the obtaining circumstances, without such a theory, neither victory nor our objectives were attainable.

His experiences during the anti-colonial struggles and his revolutionary philosophical outlook led him, inexorably, to advocate and embrace socialism. He passionately believed that the abolition of exploitation of man by man, oppression and human degradation and then a fair distribution of social wealth could be achieved not simply by superficial measures, but through a deep-going transformation of the existing socio-economic order. These ideas were instilled in our minds. They served to fire the imagination of our people.

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Dr. Jagan was an internationalist and a figure of international stature and prestige. His was a global and dialectical outlook that linked our own many-sided concerns to the multifaceted struggles, and trends taking place globally. He was certainly not a passive observer but an active participant in various events and actions at this level. "

Cheddi Jagan, worker, thinker, internationalist and socialist, was the greatest Caribbean political figure of his era.

..... Signed

BILLY STRACHAN

20th May 1997