

Democratic Renewal Of Our Society

by Janet Jagan

At a lecture at the Cheddi Jagan Research Centre on October 5, 2001, Dr Roger Luncheon spoke at length about the return of democracy to Guyana on the 9th Anniversary of the 1992 elections.

His remarks centered on the democratic renewal of our society and its effect on economic growth and social development.

The words democratic renewal have a wide and significant meaning. Our former President Cheddi Jagan said that a healthy democracy is capable of releasing the potentials of the people for the revival of the nation.

This, of course, is so vital and necessary when a society has been traumatized and gagged by an oppressive government, harsh conditions and hopelessness. This was the situation the PPP/Civic met in October 1992.

The task to restore confidence and hope was not an easy one, but it was brought about by democratic renewal. One of the first steps was to restore freedom of the press. The news media had been gagged by the PNC regime and various pressures had been put on newspapers

that did not toe the PNC line. *Mirror* is a good example. The PNC government refused licences for newsprint and printing machinery in order to suppress this newspaper.

The renewal of democracy meant the extension of the protection of people's rights. For example, the rights to travel had been violated. The right to a fair trial was not guaranteed as long as the state had the right to imprison persons without trial. There was interference in people's privacy by phone tapping and mail inspection. People were searched at random and held in prison beyond the legal period.

Parliament was democratised and ceased to be a "steam roller." Members' motions and questions were brought to the agenda. I can remember, as a Member of Parliament, I put about 20 questions relating to the Jonestown disaster, asking how weapons were there without permits; how poisons were allowed without a registered pharmacy; how foreign currency was permitted without permission; how Jim Jones was allowed to prevent people from entering Jonestown and leaving Jonestown -- one of the particular reasons for the destruction, suicide and murder that later took place.



Lecture held at the Cheddi Jagan Research Centre on the 9th Anniversary of the PPP/C in government on October 5. L-R: Dr Roger Luncheon (main speaker), President Jagdeo, Donald Ramotar, PPP General Secretary and Ms Janet Jagan.

Not one of my questions was ever put in the Order Paper of the National Assembly. I tabled the questions again, after Parliament reconvened after another rigged elections and still no answer!

That is how Parliament operated in the days the PNC was in control. Dr Cheddi Jagan, Leader of the Opposition was not permitted to speak in Parliament for over two years and up to the time of the 1992 elections when he became President. These are only two examples of the many irregularities.

Restoring democracy to our Parliament was a great advancement in our renewal approach and it is still going

on. The democratic renewal of our society has been like the rainbow -- with many colours and hues. The removal of fear was an important element. People used to be afraid to speak out for fear of some sort of repercussion or reprisal -- like being fired from their job. Fear of not attending a fund-raiser for the PNC. Many lost their jobs for that or fear of being persecuted by the state apparatus for associating with persons not backing the PNC.

I know of cases wherein Guyanese refused out of fear for their lives to come back to Guyana while the PNC was in office because of (1) a marriage to a PPP activist (2) a

decision not in favour of the PNC (3) an opinion the PNC did not like, and so on. These were real. Rickey Singh and Rick Mentis were kicked output of their jobs at the *Graphic* news paper for exposing the riggers in 1973 elections. Father Wong was dismissed as editor of the *Catholic Standard* for the same "offence."

From October 5, 1992, such fears were totally and finally eradicated, part of the democratic renewal. How many people now remember this and remember why and how it happened?

There are many aspects of the democratic renewal process that changed the face of our nation where suffer-

ing and humiliation had been so terrible during the days of PNC rule. Can we ever forget this dreadful past? If we do, it is at our own peril.

The rights of labour have been protected by real wages and the dramatic drop in the inflation rate. The rate is now down to rock bottom. To their discredit, many of the trade unions, influenced by political motivation know this, but refuse to admit that workers have done far better under the PPP/Civic than they did in the 28 years of PNC.

Democratic renewal also meant that there has been a focus and growth of children's and women's rights. Significant gains that make Guyana proud have been achieved in these areas.

Arising out of these renewals there has been an "explosion" as Dr Luncheon said, of expression in the arts, literature, dance and drama. As well, there has been an "explosion" of the talents and intellects of Guyana's children in the field of education, achievements we see all around us and which make all Guyanese proud that our children are breaking through the barriers that once held them back. All that changed in October 1992!