

REMEMBERING THE PAST & LIVING THE PRESENT

by Janet Jagan

We hear, almost constantly in the media about racial problems in Guyana. The news columns and the letter pages of particularly one newspaper, are filled with accusations, many charging "plague on both parties," equaling the PNC and the PPP on this allegation, while hostile TV stations dig deep chasms of discord by their foul utterances.

The question can be asked: is the PPP a racial Party? Is it a racial party because it is accused of being one? Does that make it a Party of race?

History and the present circumstances tell a different story. I remember an Afro-American woman who came to Guyana to help in the struggle during the 60's saying to me: "Just because Indians support the PPP doesn't make it a racial party. They back the PPP because they believe what it stands for." I found those, pretty sound words.

The PPP grew out of the

trade union movement. (The four founders of the Political Affairs Committee which laid the foundations for the formation of the People's Progressive Party, were all working in trade unions). It was and remains a party of the working people - workers and farmers. It just so happens that the largest segment of Guyanese workers come from the sugar industry where the majority, out of historical circumstances, are East Indians. It also happens that the majority of small farmers produce rice and also, by historical circumstances, are East Indians.

I remember that when we had the constituency system of elections I was twice returned as the legislative representative for the Essequibo Coast. There I met the remnants of a feudal land system, and spent much of my time representing terribly exploited tenant rice farmers. Did I fight for their rights because they were Indo-Guyanese, or because of exploitation? Obviously



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the latter was the reason.

We also, in those days on the Essequibo, which included the Pomeroon River (mostly non-East Indians) contributed to the well being of the small farmers by:

- 1) providing thousands of coconut plants free to increase production of copra
- 2) offered crop bonus for farmers who planted new crops
- 3) set up the marketing division which provided prompt and remunerative returns to farmers for their products
- 4) Sent in doctors on a regular basis into the Pomeroon.

This was the pattern of all PPP legislative representa-

tives.

And yet the accusation of race continued by those who hated the PPP and wanted it out of office.

In 1965, the year after the PPP was removed from office by a manipulated coalition and following the terrible years of deliberate divide and rule policies by the British, PPP leader Cheddi Jagan called on the Guyanese people "regardless of race or ethnic origin to unite and struggle for better conditions."

That year he again repeated his theme of unity and racial harmony, saying, "Racism is the greatest curse of our land ... anyone who spread racial propaganda must be severely dealt with. Such a person is an enemy to himself and his country."

In 1966 he continued his call for racial harmony at the 13th Congress of the PPP: -

"We must concentrate on day to day work on every front to achieve racial integration and unity of the working class."

This theme of racial unity was part and parcel of the PPP throughout the years, never faltering, always seeking national unity. Again in 1967, at the Party's Annual Congress Dr. Jagan in his report to delegates said: "Unity of the working class regardless of race is vital. If we are to go forward, the party must have the backing of the working class, the peasantry and the intelligensia, not of one race but of all races ... we must combat racism mercilessly and build a disciplined party of quality rather than mere quantity. We must relentlessly expose and attack the coalition government for subverting the Constitution and making plans to rig the next elections."

Throughout the 60's, 70's and 80's, the PPP consistently and vigorously pursued a path of racial harmony and unity. So how could it be labeled a racial party?

The present, throughout

the 90's, when the PPP, once free and fair elections were held, again gained victory at the polls, continued its task of achieving national unity.

Its policies during its eight years in office bear up to its integrity and determination. The PPP/Civic's achievements in rebuilding the nation after the catastrophic years of PNC rule have been without favour or prejudice. A look at its policies and application of restoring education, its pure water, housing and health achievements and the rebuilding of all that had deteriorated are living proof that the PPP is not and has not been a party of race. Yet those who do actually propound race and create racial crises charge the PPP with their own crimes. One has only to see and listen and thus know the truth. The truth is evident to those whose eyes are not clouded by the lies and distortions that abound.