

REMEMBERING THE PAST & LIVING THE PRESENT

by Janet Jagan

The PNC and its supporters are trying to make a big deal about the use or, as they allege, misuse of the State Media during elections.

The state media has been notoriously in the hands of the PNC, one way or another. Even in Colonial times, its friends, as in the bureaucracy, have always held key positions which relentlessly worked against any party or group opposing that party.

In the PPP governments of 1957-61 and 1961-64 the GIS and the radio station, as well as the newspapers, were all hostile to the elected government. So uncooperative was the GIS (Government Information Ser-

vices) and so openly hostile was the rest of the media that it was necessary for the PPP to have a voice during these crucial years. The PPP government's positions, its utterances, its achievements, its views were drowned out by media blackouts.

Thus *Mirror* was founded in 1962, to give fair media coverage of the PPP's positions and policies. This was the time when the *Chronicle*, under D'Aguiar and Nascimento, was distorting the truth and creating mass hysteria. I can remember headlines shouting that Cuban gunboats were offshore, ready to land; that thousands of Cubans were in Guiana (there were two Cuban diplomats in the country!), etc.

Later, after the British/American manipulations to

change the electoral system and then pitchforked D'Aguiar and Burnham into a coalition, the hostile media situation continued and even worsened.

In the ensuing rigged elections, every effort was made to black out stories of rigging. Those exposing the electoral rigging, like Rickey Singh and Ric Mentis at the *Graphic* and Father Wong at *Catholic Standard* were dismissed for exposing electoral rigging.

Even more vicious steps were taken by the Burnham regime. *Mirror* newspaper was denied licences to import newsprint and printing equipment. The newspaper was forced out of publication on more than one occasion because it had no newsprint.

This was challenged in the courts and in the first instance, a judge pronounced that no newsprint was equal to denying the right to freedom of expression. But this was appealed by the PNC regime and with precision, the higher court threw this out. This was the kind of judicial justice that had existed.

The PNC hired thugs to beat up *Mirror* vendors to push the newspaper off the street. The truth, according to Burnham and his PNC, was not to be told.

Libel was used, also, as a weapon against *Mirror* and *Catholic Standard*, the only newspapers not under the thumb of the PNC.

The state media, tightly controlled by the PNC, gave the most minimal voice to parties contesting the gen-

eral elections, both before and after independence.

Since the restoration of democracy in 1992, there is no evidence of abuse of the media by the PPP/Civic. In fact, there are criticisms that it has been too tolerant and has bent backwards not to ruffle too many feathers. The media is surely one area where political appointments were made by the PNC. If one followed the practice in the USA, all political appointees would have lost their jobs when the new government came into office.

Now reviews of the media are asserting that the PPP/Civic is getting too much coverage although there is an admission that this concerns government news, not necessarily that of the PPP *per se*. It is obvious that the

major news stories will deal with government policies and results, such as new housing schemes, extension of pure water supplies, tackling health issues like HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, road programmes, education policies and new schools, life in the interior, talks on the border issues, fiscal matters, constitutional issues, police matters, lands and mines, poverty alleviation and so on. Such matters, which necessarily involve the government of the day, are bound to dominate the news and cannot be deemed 'political.' They are part of the life of the Guyanese community and it would be wrong to designate such as a political advantage over the parties contesting the elections.