

**ADDRESS by Her Excellency Mrs. Janet Jagan, O.E.,
President of the Republic of Guyana
at Medgar Evers College, SUNY Brooklyn, N.Y.
September 23, 1998**

**“NEW & RESTORED DEMOCRACIES”
The Guyana Experience”**

*Chandru Mudi
Jagan Wani
Jm Chandrasekhar
U.N. Gen.
Assembly
Clinton/Horowitz*

Mr. Chairman, President Jackson, Faculty and Students of
Medgar Evers, fellow Guyanese and friends

I am especially glad to have this opportunity to visit with you
today.

Medgar Evers College has long been recognised as a home in
New York for many of our Caribbean diaspora. Some of our own
students have come to the college in pursuit of higher studies, and
for several years now the University of Guyana has had a
programme of active co-operation with the College that is very
much valued by my Government. Consequently, I felt that I could
not come to New York without visiting the campus to personally
express my appreciation of our continuing co-operation.

As students of Caribbean affairs, many of you will no doubt have
followed with interest recent developments in Guyana.

Nonetheless, it may be useful for you to have, so to speak, an insider's view to allow you to better understand them.

For the purpose of my talk this evening, I will begin with a few observations on the December 1997 elections which saw the return of our party the PPP/CIVIC to Government in an impressive victory. It was only the second time in a period of some thirty odd years, that free and fair elections were held in Guyana. The first was in 1992, when, after spending almost twenty-eight years in the political wilderness as a result of a conspiracy - both local and foreign, to keep us out of power, we triumphed in an open and transparent poll. The interval between the two events as well as subsequent developments have certainly taught me how fragile a flower democracy is, and why, no matter how great the effort, we must do our best to preserve it.

The PPP/Civic victory in 1992 was a victory for all the people of Guyana. It was like a breath of fresh air. It was reminiscent of the first PPP victory in 1953. Then there was a spirit of oneness and togetherness. We were confident of the future and filled with patriotic fervour to start a process of genuine independence and progress.

It was the former President Aristide of Haiti, I believe, who said that the real ^{challenge} task of democracy comes not in the first elections but in the second. How right he was! Having been fairly defeated again at the polls, the main opposition party in Guyana was not about to accept the results. In an ironical twist, it accused us of “rigging” the elections to keep them out. I say “ironical” since these were the same forces that had used every device imaginable, to hold on to office for almost three decades. Such was their fury at losing, that they threatened to make the country ungovernable. And indeed, to this day, they continue to sow ^{division} confusion in the society and to withhold recognition of our administration.

Out of concern for our people who have suffered enough from these manoeuvres, we agreed to outside mediation and multi-partisan dialogue. As a result, a CARICOM Mission proposed by the then Chairman, the Hon. Prime Minister of Grenada, brokered an agreement calling for an audit of the election result, and a halt to violent demonstrations. The audit has since been concluded, proving beyond a doubt that the ballot had been fair and that the PPP/CIVIC, our party, had won. Still the Opposition ^{has} refused to accept the findings, calling for continued protest and non-cooperation with the Government. Such has been the inconclusiveness of our recent experiment in democracy.

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CARICOM leaders reviewed the situation when they met in St. Lucia last July and called again on the parties to enter into meaningful talks.

Sad to say, this electoral dispute was in a way not surprising, since in Guyana, there has hardly been a tradition of democratic practice. As a colony governed for years by metropolitan powers, mainly the British, we were subjected to the classical “divide and rule” policy which pitted one section of the society against the other by various degrees of separation. The Indian element which accounts for almost ^{some 47%} fifty-two percent of the population was drawn to the rural sector, to agriculture and to private enterprise, while the African segment of ^{some} thirty per cent was largely involved in urban administration, the civil/service and the police. The racial question was therefore compounded by a class division, making it all the more tempting for unscrupulous politicians to exploit.

When we advance the idea that it was a victory for the people, we knew what we were speaking about. The lesson in Guyana that you cannot subvert the will of the people and expect to have development. The national movement started by Cheddi Jagan and others was under constant attack: there were open and subtle

interventions ostensibly to stop a Moscow conspiracy to take over Guyana, instigated riots and racial divisions and introduced constitutional fiddling. After independence the PPP won every election but was kept out of office through massive electoral rigging. The end result was that the people become impoverished and the country became one of the poorest in the Western hemisphere. Without democracy, there cannot be development.

Despite the difficulties encountered, I firmly believe that regular, free and fair elections are the single most instrument for ascertaining the popular will and facilitating democratic government. As the Spanish philosopher Ortega Y. Gasset once said - (translation), "The health of all democracies, whatever their nature or degree, depends on one small technical detail - elections. Everything else is secondary." Some may say that this is an overstatement, but it does not gainsay the fact that electoral choice and electoral control offer the citizens of a country fair representation of their interests. Periodic elections which are scrupulously conducted and respected, are undoubtedly a valuable instrument for promoting democracy.

Admittedly, however, elections cannot alone produce a democratic system. It is vital that a State also have in place the necessary

structures to sustain democracy. And in order for democracy to be self-sustaining, it has to be internalized - a process which takes time and must be consciously nurtured. I would also say that at the basis of every strong functioning democracy is a vibrant culture of participatory government. It is important that people at every level participate in the process of change and in the management of their affairs.

We need to inculcate a stakeholder's mentality in our citizens so that they feel that they are in integral part of the policy setting and management structure. It is not sufficient that their participation be limited to casting their ballots every four or five years. They must be prepared to defend the democracy they have won. A populace that is self-reliant, confident and involved is more likely to do this than one that is not. We must, therefore, consider ways and means to motivate the populace, both in terms of political participation in terms of self-help in economic and local civic projects.

Too often, there is not enough cooperation between governments and civil society, with each seeing the other as a hindrance rather than an ally. This is unfortunate since as I have just said, a democratic Government and a dynamic populace are important

agents for progress. Yet, one can understand the wariness with which some elements of civil society are often regarded. Donors - both governments and multilateral organisations - now demonstrate a strong preference for by-passing national governments and channelling donor assistance through NGO's

In a fragile democracy with weak administrative structure, this can have a profoundly destabilising effect on Government and can pit it against civil society. The donor community therefore needs to remember that non-governmental organisations have their own agendas, and that these are not necessarily in accord with the Governments. The role of government in providing a stable political, economic and social environment for its people cannot be easily transferred. Democratic Governments should therefore be assisted to perform their proper functions.

As we seek now to build a democratic and ^{consolidated} ~~non-racial~~ society in Guyana, we find that the problems are not dissimilar from those encountered in our transition to independence in the fifties and sixties. In both cases, we have been challenged to create the structural changes to support the new system. All too often many confuse democracy with electoral reform, and are slow to grasp the need for a focused effort to construct, or rebuild, as the case may

be, a new democratic society. Added to this is the fact that as small and generally weak economies, we are now caught up in the rapid pace of globalisation. It is therefore extremely difficult in these circumstances to engage in nation building and to develop a greater sense of national identity and unity.

A sine qua non for burgeoning democracies is clearly development. Democracy has little chance of taking root or of flourishing in weak economies where people cannot earn a decent living. Pervasive poverty and degrading human conditions provide fertile ground for breeding political unrest. For years, the developing countries have sought to establish just and equitable economic relations with their developed partners. Several development strategies and more recently, an Agenda for Development have been formulated after much pains - taking negotiations. To this day, however, they remain largely unfulfilled. Meanwhile, the gap between the developed and the developing parts of the world becomes dangerously wider with each passing day. Technology has opened all the windows on the world wide web and the poor everywhere can now see how the rich live. Increasingly, therefore, they will ask - what good is democracy if it cannot bring us a better life? To this question, all our governments will have to find answers.

An essential underpinning of democracy is an independent and responsible media. As a journalist for the greater part of my life, I can tell you that there is room for improvement in the role of the media in our developing societies. While many representatives are worthy of their profession, other are unfortunately less so. Increased training and a deeper sense of professionalism would certainly help to raise the level of journalistic competence. Of special importance is an enlightened constitution that provides a practical framework for preserving the Rule of Law, and good governance. A clear separation of powers- between the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary provides a balance that minimises abuses of the democratic system.

A fundamental edifice of our democracy is parliamentary democracy. From this institution will emerge important laws which must first benefit from enlightened and comprehensive examination by all those take their seats to represent the people. The late President Cheddi Jagan, speaking of multi-party democracy in his speech at the Ceremonial Opening of the Sixth Parliament stated: "It is true that a fundamental characteristic of democracy is that the will of the majority prevails over that of the minority. But the minority must be able to rest assured that

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decisions have been taken only after opposing views have been expressed. That alone must be cause for comfort. And that alone must assure the electorate that Parliamentary democracy is being practiced for the collective good of the nation.”

While democracy emphasises freedom of the individual, it also based on the will of the collective. That balance must always be kept in focus since the pursuit of freedoms could take the direction of defining personal ambitions which has little to do with political representation or the exercise of tolerance for the rights of others. Extreme individualism can lead to intolerance and contempt for the rights of others.

Nor can one overemphasise the role of education in the democratic process. An enlightened citizenry, steeped in democratic values, may be depended upon to create a free and open society. Unfortunately, because of political and economic pressures, many governments find it difficult to nurture their people through the promotion and standards of democratic ideals. As a result, one sees today in many parts of the world, a breakdown in social cohesion, leading to a failure of the democratic system. It is important, therefore, that we tend to our educational systems so that our populations, particularly our youth, are properly trained

and equipped to pursue the democratic way of life. At the heart of this education is the freedom of thought and expression which, although allowed ample rein through our constitutions, is nonetheless respectful of the opinions of the rest of society.

May I make the further point that there is no one model that can be held up as perfect. Democracy, like beauty, is in the eyes of the beholder. Each society must decide for itself how best democratic government can be achieved. However, while approaches may differ because of cultural, political, social and economic determinants, there are certain fundamental principles and values which must underpin the democratic enterprise. These include the right of all its citizens to enjoy freedom and equality to pursue a life of happiness with full respect for the rights of others. A truly democratic society must therefore preserve individual rights, ensure social justice, promote economic and social development, and strengthen national peace and security. These are now widely accepted purposes, enshrined in several declarations and other instruments adopted by the international community.

Finally, I would wish to observe that efforts to promote democracy within nations must be complemented by democratisation among nations. Democracy thrives best not when it is isolated, but when

it is allowed to grow and spread freely. An international community that adheres to democratic principles and practices will be less prone to conflict and more likely to enjoy peace and development. It is therefore in our interest to reform and restructure our global institutions particularly the United Nations, so that they may function on a more representative and transparent basis. International relations generally must be premised on the respect for the equality and sovereignty of all states.

In this context, my Government has consistently called for a more representative and transparent Security Council. The present Council which was conceived and constructed in the aftermath of World War II is clearly not appropriate or adequate to the circumstances of today's world. The composition of its membership reflects the then existing power-structure; it does not cater to the interests and concerns of the vast majority of developing countries. We must therefore strive to correct the present structural imbalance which currently prevails to make the Council more democratic and legitimate. Similarly, we must seek to enhance the role of the General Assembly, the most representative of all the Organs, in directing the work of the entire United Nations System, including the multilateral financial institutions and the newly created World Trade Organisation.

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The ~~ultimate~~ ^{An} objective of our joint endeavours ~~must~~ ^{should} be the creation of a New Global Human Order based on the highest democratic principles. ~~My late husband,~~ ^{the} President Cheddi Jagan, devoted his entire life to the pursuit of this goal. In honour of his memory, my Government will continue to engage the international community at the United Nation and elsewhere, in a dialogue aimed at building consensus on the need for such an Order. This is no easy task and to succeed, the effort must be truly a collective one. I would therefore wish to conclude by urging you, as scholars dedicated to the study of ~~humankind,~~ ^{humans} and as responsible citizens of the world, to join in ~~this campaign to~~ ^{in the task of} bring just and equitable development for all peoples. Together, we can hope to make democracy a way of life, as we enter the new millennium.

I thank you.

**PROGRAM FOR THE VISIT OF
H.E. MRS. JANET JAGAN, PRESIDENT
OF THE REPUBLIC OF GUYANA
TO MEDGAR EVERS COLLEGE
SEPTEMBER 23, 1998**

- 6:00 PM President Jagan arrives at MEC and is escorted to President Jackson's office.
- 6:00-6:20 PM President Jackson holds discussion with President Jagan
- 6:20 PM Pres. Jagan is escorted to the Auditorium for Public Lecture

AGENDA

- ❖ Opening Prayer - Dean Thomas E. Oliver
- ❖ The singing of : USA National Anthem – Mr. Rudolph Shaw
Guyana's National Anthem - Mr. Rudolph Shaw
- ❖ Recognition of officials on the dais – Amb. Pursoo
- ❖ Introduction of President Jackson - Amb. Pursoo
- ❖ President Jackson welcomes President Jagan and presents her with the Medal of Honor.

- ❖ **Invitation of Guyana's Ambassador to the USA - H.E. Dr. Odeen Ishmael to takeover the chairmanship of the meeting.**

- ❖ Introduction of President Janet Jagan - Amb. Ishmael

- ❖ The President addresses the audience.

- ❖ Question and Answer session - conducted by Amb. Ishmael.

- ❖ Vote of Thanks – Dr. Zala Chandler

The President is escorted from the Auditorium to her car.