



This Week With The President

WE BROUGHT GUYANA BACK FROM THE BRINK

Text of interview with **President Janet Jagan**
by Earl Bousquet

Earl Bousquet: Welcome to "This Week with The President" a weekly programme in which the President addresses matter of national importance. This week we will be discussing with President Janet Jagan issues pertaining to the Caricom Accord, Constitutional change, media matters, parliament, government's performance and the rights of the child. Madam President, we will be discussing first of all the Caricom Accord. Of course it has been called by many names — the Caricom Accord, the Herdmanston Accord, and, coming out of it all, is a Menu of Measures which has been discussed with you, and aimed at restoring post-elections political normalcy. The "Three Wise Men" came here from Caricom. You met with them and a few days ago you also met with the Caricom Chairman, Dr. Keith Mitchell, Prime Minister of Grenada. Against that background, could you share your views with us and your understanding of the contents of the accord ?

President Jagan: Well, I think the Accord has given us the breathing space so that we could face the many problems that our country has before it. But, most of all,

have a normal life, we must have dialogue between our two parties, and that is very important.

When the negotiators proposed that we should have dialogue, we immediately agreed. We nominated our trusted colleague, Dr. Roger Luncheon, to be our representative for the dialogue. This has actually been done a long time ago, as reconfirmed by the three-man delegation that came here from the Caribbean.

Besides the dialogue other important aspects of the Accord include the holding of an audit, (and arrangements are now in train to hold this audit), to establish what really took place, to go into all aspects of the elections.

We are also asking that all the ballot boxes be opened. We have nothing to be afraid of. We know the composition of the Elections Commission, we know how they operated, we have nothing to be afraid of. I say: open all the ballot boxes, count all the ballots, including all the rejected ballots...a lot of rejected ballots belong to the PPP/Civic, and I want that looked into.

We have been very patient, but we have to put an end to the many things that have been said [about elections rigging].

Sections of our media have not been very helpful. In fact, they have been used as an agitating force to bring people out in the streets to destroy our country, prevent our children from going to school, harm people, etc. Well, we hope those days are over, but we have the audit to go through. We will therefore be examining the names proposed for the audit.

Then we have the question of looking into our Constitution. There are many aspects of our Constitution that need looking into...

Earl Bousquet: (Interjecting) In fact, that would have been my next question....

President Jagan: Well then, since it is your next question, let me say — and do not forget — I am one who would never forget that the same Constitution we are living under was instituted or shot down everyone's throats by the PNC. No one paid any attention then. It was a PNC Constitution tailored to fit Mr. Burnham, to give him the Presidency, to give him important powers as President.

But I am more interested in having a popular Constitution; one that would entrench democracy, that would help all Guyanese feel that they are protected, that they have genuine equal rights, and equal opportunities. These things must be put into the Constitution in a manner that offers guarantees to anyone who may feel excluded.

In my New Year's address I made it clear that I believe in an inclusive Government and inclusive society. No one must feel left out or kept out. We have worked very hard during the past five years to have an inclusive society.

Let me just make one example the people of Amerindian origin. They have been kept out of our society, denied rights, and we have gone out of our way to give

them, rather allow them, their rights.

Not that we are paternalistic. All the people of this country deserve equal rights, equal opportunities, equal access to our educational system, which in the past many of them in the interior have been denied.

Another aspect I think would be to look into the Regional system. There are many flaws in our Regional system and I think that they should be cleared up.

I would also say that we have to look at the method of voting. Do we want Proportional Representation? Do we want to go back to the first-past-the-post system? Or do we want a combination of the two, which the late President thought might have been possible? We have to see what is possible.

Of course, I must remind you that Proportional Representation was introduced to get us out of office, and perhaps it was some irony of history that the same Proportional Representation which was instituted with the consent of the PNC to get us out of office, has now allowed us to win in a free and fair election. But now, the same people who supported and introduced Proportional Representation do not like it and are crying out, now that it does not fit them.

Sometimes you have to cut the cloth to suit the body. I do not know, but all I know is I believe in democracy, and I believe in free and fair elections and I will do all I can to see that these exist [in the Constitution].

Earl Bousquet: You want Democracy to be the tailor...

President Jagan: Democracy should be the tailor. That is why I say that we need a more popular Constitution which entrenches democracy, because we have to remember that there was no democracy during those 28 years, no matter what people would talk about now.

Someone must go back and remember what happened in those years, when it was rough and rights were denied. Things were pretty bad those days.

Earl Bousquet: The PPP had over the years since the 1980 Constitution came into force, been agitating for constitutional change. After it came to office in 1992 there was a Constitutional Review Commission appointed in the last Parliament. What happened there?

President Jagan: Well, because of the intransigence of the PNC in taking a long period to make up their mind as to whether they want to be a part of the Constitutional Commission its work was held back. It started rather late and it was therefore unable to complete the work before elections.

It is now suggested that a new Constitution Committee be set up, but the submission process would not be a continuation of the previous one. The suggestion is that it be an entirely new Commission.

Earl Bousquet: Perhaps we could move on to media matters. One of the facilita-

tors of the discussion and dialogue between the parties and in the implementation of the Peace Accord, Mr. Hugh Chomondeley, met with the media just a few days ago and he did in fact let them know that he was personally not satisfied with the way in which the media have been performing before, during and after elections.

You have been a journalist for as long as you have been a politician. As a journalist, give us your view on how the media performed, if you may.

President Jagan: As you said, I am probably one of the oldest serving members of the media or journalist community in Guyana. I began my career with the bulletin of the Political Affairs Committee way back in 1946.

I have been appalled by what has taken place in the media. I am ashamed that a profession that has such dignity and respect in the world, that has produced such great journalists, should sink to the level of journalism we see in some media today in Guyana. The word "appalling" is mild but, I hope that members realise that by their behaviour, by what they have been saying, by what they have been doing and the role they have taken, they have contributed to the situation we faced.

They seem to have forgotten that the role of the journalist is to record what is actually taking place, not what they think is taking place, or what they consider is taking place. There's so much misinformation, so many lies, so many distortions — and above all, so much hate. I wrote an essay about two years ago after the Prime Minister of Israel was assassinated. I said that in our country we are producing hate. Hate is harmful. It leads to vengeance. It leads to people being assassinated and killed.

We have had one death already. We have hundreds of people who have been assaulted. We have women who have been treated most disgustingly and yet our journalists do not even worry about that. They are more worried about tear-gassing, as if tear-gassing is a brutality. They do not understand that they have encouraged people to be brutal on the streets, to commit terrorist acts, like the one that killed this young man.

They encouraged such unbelievable lies — like the one that "Oh! It is the PPP/Civic that put the bomb that killed the man," and all that. Where are we when the media has lost its reason for being?

The media has one reason for being and that is to inform the public about what is going on. This is how they are to do it. They can interpret the news and give their views, but it must be reasonable and responsible.

I am hoping that it is possible for some of our journalists to remember the great profession they belong to, and they must not mess it up, they must not dirty it. They must go back to the basics and that is telling the truth as it is.

Earl Bousquet: In fact, one of the things Mr. Chomondeley said was that, this was one of the largest gatherings of journalists he had ever seen in Guyana over the

past five years. He made the point that apart from politicians the only other force that can wreck the Accord is the media. He was pleading for responsible journalism. So, your appeal for responsible media coverage in this period is very much on target.

President Jagan: I hope so...

Earl Bousquet: The next issue I want to talk about has to do with Parliament. And that is another burning issue. The Caricom Accord calls on the Government of Guyana to pass the enabling legislation to ensure that the results of the audit can become official. What are the plans to go into Parliament?

President Jagan: The PPP/Civic had submitted our list. After the various parties have submitted their lists Parliament would be convened. I anticipate that Parliament will be convened towards the end of February.

Earl Bousquet: In spite of the post-election problems that the country has had to face, the new government has been working. You in fact have been quite busy...

President Jagan: There is a lot of work going on. For instance, a very important thing happened during the election period and people may have overlooked it because of their other concerns. The IMF and the World Bank gave approval to US\$253 million that will help us contribute to the write-off of the huge foreign debt that we inherited from the previous government. You know, this has been a dreadful burden that we have had to deal with.

The late President [Dr. Cheddi Jagan] was very much involved in negotiation for this IMF/World Bank debt write-off approval. This negotiation has been going on for two years and finally our Finance Minister has told us that it is now concluded and by 1999 the actual relief will flow into our budget.

So now, the large amount of money that has been going out of the country in debt payments and interests will now come back into our Treasury. This will be important in carrying out the social works for the social benefit of the country.

We have also signed contracts for over G\$200 million for infrastructure works. These include sea defences, bridges, community roads, farm to market roads, sluices and all of that and we will continue this as part of our responsibilities.

We have been working on our fisheries development which is going a far way. Forestry is doing okay as well. I would like to say too that our land distribution process continues and that has to do with giving land and land titles to farmers.

The Police Force too, has to be strengthened. We found during the period of disturbance that there was a lot of equipment that they needed. We are going to do our best to see that they get proper equipment, vehicles, and the other things needed.

One disgraceful aspect of the disturbances was that those involved in leading the lawless crowds interfered with the police communication system, which I consider a matter of violation of National Security.

For people to interfere with police communication is really something awful and we hope that it will not happen again. Our Force must have a more sophisticated communication system and we are providing the money for this.

We are also concerned with restoring our moral and ethical standards. I wanted to read to you a section of our 1997 PPP/Civic Manifesto where we said: "One of the more serious consequences of the 28 years of living in the political and social wilderness created by the PNC, has been the incredible damage done to the individual and collective psyche of the Guyanese nation."

And further, we also said in 1997: "The nation, with the PPP/Civic at the head, had started a long process to halt the decline and damage and to rebuild and rejuvenate the nation."

Now, as in 1992, the need to rebuild our collective psyche and self-confidence is equally vital. We will intensify efforts to strengthen the social fabric of our democracy and to continue relentlessly to encourage people to develop due respect for law and order, morality and ethics, which are fundamental to the common good. We saw a breakdown in this, but we have to restore our dignity as a nation. We have to restore our ethical standards and I am counting on prominent members of the Guyanese society to lead the way.

I am counting on the religious organisations to do their part, to see that the moral fabric of our society is not torn.

Earl Bousquet: Madam President, children have been very close to your heart. You've written books of children stories, and for quite a long time you have been the head of the National Committee on the Rights of the Child. What is going to be your relationship with that committee now that you are President?

President Jagan: I think that now that I am President perhaps it would not be the correct thing for me to chair the meetings, but we will find a chairperson. The work will go on. I was in close contact because I was part of the process of setting out the aims of the Commission on the Rights of the Child.

We have as a responsibility to the child — and as a responsibility to the United Nations — to fulfill the provisions of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, which says, for example, that every child must have the right to a good education. We are working on that educational system which has improved tremendously.

We also have the responsibility to provide for good health to every child, that is, vaccination, preventive medicine, pure water etc. .

We also have a commitment to take care of the homeless children, and not to overlook the needs of disabled children. We also have another responsibility — and that is what our program in Parliament is about — to look at the question

of the legal rights of children, which we are in the process of formulating.

There's also my recent announcement which I told you about and that's the focus on dental health for children. That is very important.

We believe that it is the responsibility of the people of this country to see that our children are properly educated and prepared for the next century. That is why we are all so concerned about bringing in the latest technology and having a good background in science. Without that, I don't think our children would be able to face up to what would be taking place in the next century.

I may mention also that there is a Cheddi Jagan Children Fund, and the Committee for that Fund has made a decision that the money would be used to establish libraries for schoolchildren, mainly libraries for elementary and secondary school children, so that children will be encouraged to read.

I don't think our children are reading enough. We don't want them to be glued to the television, and we would like our children to broaden themselves to continue what is perhaps one of the most important sources of education — reading and writing.

So let me assure you that the concern of children is upper-most in the mind of all the ministers and the government as part of our policies of good governance for all children.

Earl Bousquet: Well, I would like to thank you, Madam President. (First broadcast on Sunday, January 25, 1988)



Children.....Upper most in our mind