



THIS WEEK WITH THE PRESIDENT

* PROUD RECORD IN SOCIAL SERVICES, GOOD GOVERNANCE AND AMERINDIAN RIGHTS

**MANY MEMORIES OF CHEDDI JAGAN

TEXT OF INTERVIEW WITH PRESIDENT JANET JAGAN BY
TELEVISION JOURNALIST MICHELLE ELPHAGE

Michelle Elphage: In "This week with the President" we will explore the social sector and look at what's currently taking place in education, housing, water, as well as Amerindian land titles and other issues.

Welcome Madam President. It's a pleasure having you here.

President Janet Jagan: Thank you very much.

Elphage: Madam President, you must have been very pleased with Guyana's performance at the 1997 CXC examination results. Guyana copped the Caribbean's Most Outstanding Awards. Is this an indication of greater things to come in the education sector?

President Jagan: Oh, Absolutely! I thought it was great when I read in the newspapers that our three students topped the list. I felt very proud. And I want to

extend my very personal congratulations to the three winners, Mohalini Chatterdeo, who won the overall outstanding achievement award; Delon Wilson and Samantha Scotland. I think they have done a tremendous job and they have also boosted the morale of our people.

We need this, especially as we look back at the dismal picture of education when we took over the government in 1992. The whole education system had virtually collapsed. Our formal education system at the nursery, primary, high school levels and university and vocational training were in disarray. The teachers' morale was low and, I would say, parents, teachers and students had lost almost all confidence. This was reflected in poor CXC results in the past.

Guyana at one time, I can remember, was the proud winner of the highest awards in the Caribbean and then we went right down into a terribly deep rut. But from Day One of the PPP/Civic Government we started focusing on education because we know that the pillar of our strength as a nation is our children, and our children have to be properly educated. In this direction, in our five years in office, over four hundred schools were either repaired or new schools rebuilt. And some would say, "what's that? That's only fixing the schools!". But the children need a good environment in which to learn. And I know that at some schools when it rained, the children had to move the benches to get out of the way.

Today all our new schools now have proper sanitary facilities and they have water for the children to flush toilets, wash their hands, etc. We are also proud of other aspects of the new education system – taking care of the teaching profession, teacher training and getting teachers properly paid. If their [teachers] conditions are not good they cannot give of their best. So in this period we did our very best to boost the morale of teachers. We have increased the number of teachers at the Cyril Potter School of Education and also we are now doing what the late President [Dr. Cheddi Jagan] did some years ago, establishing regional training centres for teachers.

Under our new Government we have increased the budgetary allocation for education by 276% and we increased teachers' salaries by over 300%. We have also expanded pre-school and nursery training; we're moving ahead with changes in the curricula; we're printing our own school books, and we have activated distance education.

So finally, we are starting to see the results and I think that these three young students are the results of the emphasis that we are putting in good education. We still face a problem with many of the children who attended the primary and secondary schools when education was neglected. We have a large number of functional illiterates on our hands, which has prevented many of the young people between the 18-22 age group from getting good jobs. Our task is to raise the level of these former students. We have to have a system of adult education so that they

can regain what they have lost. A lot of these young people don't have a grasp of English, Mathematics or Science. If we could encourage them to go to night schools or participate in adult education, we can bring back the lost years. So while there are some things that I feel are going pretty good in the direction of education, we still a long way to go, but we are going there.

Elphage: You mentioned children having water to flush toilets and it brought to mind that in the past weeks we have been having bad signals about our potable water supply. Right now an "El Nino" expert is in Guyana to deal with water distribution management. Do you see "El Nino" having any adverse effects on our Agriculture?

President Jagan: I think that El Nino is something we have to pay considerable attention to and I am very happy to have an expert here to help us. This is a problem facing countries all over the world. We got through the last period of drought relatively good — not perfectly, but we managed our agriculture so that our farming community did not suffer too much. I am hoping that this drought period would not be prolonged.

As for potable water supply we have an imminent plan to bring water to every home by the time we reach the next century. And I think we can do it by putting in a lot of money and time and expertise to solve our water problem. It has been neglected for so long that it will take time. But we have to see that our people and our schools have water. Right now our heavily populated urban areas need attention. Currently there is a massive programme for our rural and hinterland communities, and I am hoping that we can retain the funds that were allocated for this.

I want to urge every person in Guyana who uses water, and that is every person, please use your water cautiously now. Don't leave on taps when you are collecting water or washing dishes or clothes. Think of other people who also need water and let's conserve in this difficult moment.

Elphage: Do you see El Nino having any effect on Guyana's water-for-all programme by the year 2000?

President Jagan: No. Well I hope not, because a lot of our water is coming from wells. I was told that El Nino will not really affect the water under the ground. I am hopeful that the digging of wells which will be a great part of our water supply system will not be affected by El Nino.

Elphage: Madam President, over the past three weeks the papers have continued to publish the names and particulars of persons being allocated government house lots. Yet critics of the government continue to say there is discrimination in this area. How is the housing sector doing right now?

President Jagan: The distribution or allocation of house lots is mainly on the basis of need, mainly for cases of over-crowding, families with large numbers of children or dependants or persons who are either homeless or living in crowded conditions with relatives. These people get priority and I would challenge those who suggest any form of discrimination to examine the total list and they would be very surprised to see how the allocations are made.

You will remember, years ago I was the Minister of Labour, Health and Housing [in an earlier 1957-61 PPP Government] and it was my job then to allocate all the houses and apartments in Ruimveldt and La Penitence —the whole area of South Georgetown which is a government housing scheme. And you will find that those allocations were again based on necessity. We were trying to clear out the slums and we were giving priority to those who had large families and who were living in crowded conditions etc.. An examination of those persons who were allocated housing will again show that there was absolutely no discrimination and that the allocations were on the basis of need.

And this is how we conduct our business: fairly, squarely without any form of discrimination or patronage. We have done our very best to help solve the housing problem. We wish we had more money because housing is not a cheap venture; it is expensive but we have done the best we can under these conditions by providing house lots. Our aim is 30,000 house lots by the beginning of the next century. We have already allocated well over 14,000 by December last but I think this has already gone up considerably.

The ownership of a house lot is something a poor man could not attain before our time. I remember once I was talking to Ex-president Jimmy Carter. I told him about our programme of distribution of house lots and I said there is a complaint that some people who have been given house lots do not have the money to build right away. He said to me (because he has been in housing for a long time) "don't worry; as long as the person has the house lot and owns it, that is the first step and he or she will find the means if it takes two, three or four years to start, even they start small."

So it is the question of the ownership of house lots that give the security and confidence for people to go forward. But you may remember that when we came into the government the previous government under former President Hoyte had closed down the housing department. There was no housing going on at all. You also have to remember that during that period there was tremendous and wide-scale squatting. We have done our best to regularise the squatting areas which I think is a big plus for the PPP/Civic government because thousands of people had been squatting on land because they had no where else to go. And rather than to allow them to be permanent squatters we said, "No. Let them have the right to the

land they were squatting on". We are giving the dignity of owing land to former "squatters" and to make them citizens of residential areas. Over the years they will improve their own housing and make life more beautiful and pleasant for themselves.

Elphage: Are you confident that you will meet the 30,000 target by the year 2000?

President Jagan: Oh yes, we are looking all over for land. We have a couple of areas where there are problems that could have resulted in racial conflict. We abhor any form of racial conflict. So we are solving these problems by finding more land. We have two such problems on the East Coast and we are asking in one instance for Guysuco to release some land so that we can settle this problem by having sufficient land for everyone to get a house lot.

Guyana has a lot of land. We are one of the most fortunate countries in the world, unlike our neighbours in South America. Forget about the islands; they have space problems. In South America most of the lands are owned by very rich landowners who dominate everything. But here in Guyana the state owns most of the land. So we can allocate land to farmers, to people exploring for minerals, and people in need of housing. In this way I feel confident that we will reach our goal.

Elphage: If we might move into the interior. Madam President, the demarcation of Amerindian lands is taking place. This has been an outstanding issue. What is the progress in this area?

President Jagan: Oh, I think we are moving smartly now. I can remember when Guyana became Independent. We agreed to certain conditions set down by the British government to guarantee to all the Amerindian peoples the land which they have claimed to be their own. That was one of the obligations of the then government. Unfortunately the previous government had 28 years in office but did not deal with the problem.

Now, we have gone into the process. The first real problem in the demarcation of the land was that we do not sufficient surveyors. But last year we allocated a very large sum of money to do the surveys of all the land.

Then the elections came and some people [opposition] were propagating the false notion that the government of Guyana was going to take away the land from the Amerindian people. I think that this was a disgusting and dastardly act. Anyhow, the fact of the matter is that we have guaranteed Amerindians the right to their lands and we will see they get their land. No foreign companies or local companies will have any licence to exploit land where Amerindians are living. I was interviewed just the other day by a BBC correspondent who asked me about the protection of the environment and I made it absolutely clear that no company will be given any land that belongs or is designated for the Amerindian people.

"Designated" is probably the best word because we are in the process of legalising their rights.

So I feel very strongly about this, and I know that as long as the PPP/Civic remains the Government we would never tolerate any infringement of the rights of the Amerindian people to their lands. They are the first people in this country and their rights have to be respected.

Elphage: Madam President you issued a proclamation on Thursday to convene the seventh parliament of Guyana and to summon the regional or the local government bodies to elect their representatives to the Assembly. Where do we go from here?

President Jagan: Well, as we develop good governance, we need to continue to institutionalise a democratic Parliament elected by the people. That is the highest forum of the land and the sooner it meets it is better to get on to the business of the nation.

We have fixed February 26th as the opening of Parliament. I see a lot of work ahead for this body. During the past five years we have been introducing various procedures to help make it more participatory, and more inclusive, so that parties which are not in the government but which are opposition are included in all the major development that is taking place in the country. I personally had the good fortune to sit on one of the Select Committees. That's the system that Dr. Jagan introduced... when a Bill came to Parliament and once there's any controversy or any difficulty with it, it is put to a Select Committee with representatives of each party working out the details, clause by clause. In my experience with the Integrity Bill in Select Committee I found that parliamentary colleagues worked very well together; we didn't quarrel. We worked together, exchanged ideas and we came to conclusions.

In this way we also put out very good integrity legislation which is now been put into use. We passed very important legislation last year concerning working peoples' rights, the rights to severance pay, the Trade Union Recognition bill, which had been hanging around since 1953. We finally got that through. We passed a very important piece of legislation against discrimination at work, so that no employer can discriminate against any worker on the grounds of race, religion or gender.

And so it was a rich period in our history for five years and I'm hoping that the next period ahead of us will also be a period of rich engagement, friendly engagement in Parliament where we can solve a lot of our problems.

We want a harmonious country with embraces national unity. We want people to work together; to avoid confrontation because confrontation would not carry our country forward. We have to work together and I think our Parliament is a means of working together in the interest of the nation.

Unfortunately as President I cannot be an active Member of Parliament. It will be the first time I will not be in parliament since a great number of years [Janet Jagan first entered the Parliament in 1953]. But I know that all those who have been elected to parliament will give their best. I am quite sure of that.

Elphage: Next month, March 6th will be the anniversary of the death of your husband, the late President, Dr. Cheddi Jagan. I know this brings back memories for you. But how do you think Guyana should remember this exceptional leader?

President Jagan: Well, I think they must remember him as the father of independence. People also say that he's the Father of the Nation. He gave his whole life to the betterment of the Guyanese people. He fought tirelessly for national unity and he made such a tremendous contribution! I don't think he could ever be forgotten, but on that day we want to remember him in different ways.

You may remember we established a Cheddi Jagan Children's Fund. The decision of the children's fund committee was to use the funds to purchase books for libraries for school children, so on that day we're going to open 13 libraries in different parts of Guyana and bring the books to the schools. I've been working with the Ministry of Education and we visited book shops in Guyana and we found some wonderful books. We want to give the children a wide range of the Classics, dictionaries, encyclopedias, books that children like to read, including a lot of science books.

Also we will be launching a book that was published in England, edited by our UNESCO Ambassador, Dr. David Dabydeen. It's a book containing poems and tributes to Dr. Jagan after he died. There were many beautiful poems. I can remember one by our national author, Jan Carew and another by the late dancer, Helen Taitt. Before she died she wrote a beautiful poem. We will have a ceremony at the cremation site and will unveil a plaque there. There will be other forms of commemorating his death. I feel it should be more in the form of a celebration of a great man, rather than mourning. He's been dead for a year now and I think the contributions he made and the unique qualities of this man will remain in everyone's memory for a long time.

Elphage: As his death anniversary approaches, what are your most outstanding memories of him?

President Jagan: My personal outstanding memories of course are many, but, well when we were married. I'll always remember that we were both very poor and all we could afford was a wedding at the City Hall in Chicago where you just had to pay a few dollars for a certificate and I remember Cheddi bought me a flower. We had our picture taken in one of these little booths. When you put in 25c you get a picture; that was our wedding picture! So that was a great day in my life of course,

and then when I came to Guyana for the first time; that was very important.

But I think I remember him most for his work mainly among workers,

among sugar workers and saw-mill workers. He was involved at different times in two trade unions ...he was always a man of the people and his greatest concern always was with the welfare of the working people as well as his patriotism and love of his country. He loved his country dearly and wanted to see his country get ahead. He was really the first man who recognized that we had to sever our relations with the colonial power and be an independent nation. So there are so many things he did throughout his life that are worthwhile but I'll always remember in 1965, after he was more or less catapulted out of office (they cut down his term of office by a year; the CIA and many others were making trouble) that my husband sat down at his little desk and he wrote, **West on**



Trial. With all the problems he'd faced, and was facing, he just sat down quietly, spent a couple of months writing this book which I think is a very important contribution to the literature and history of our country and region.

So I have many memories of him — memories of him playing with his grand children. He used to play-fight with them, lift them up and throw them around, take them swimming. He enjoyed their company very much. He loved children, all children!

Elphage: Madam President, I sincerely thank you.

(First broadcast on February 8, 1998)

"This Week with the President" is a GIS/GTV radio/television production which is available for public broadcasting. Interviews in print are edited and slightly abridged.
Moses V. Nagamootoo, Minister of Information
