

PARTY LIFE:

Jack Kelshall: Great Friend of the PPP

by Janet Jagan

Jack Kelshall played an important role in the life of our party for a four year period in the sixties - one of the most crucial and difficult periods in the 41 year history of the PPP.

Jack was a Trinidadian, a leftist, a progressive, brilliant lawyer, a trade unionist, a highly cultured man who gave great support and inspiration to the arts in his home country. He was also a very wealthy man who owned a yacht and the largest library of West Indian writings in the region.

I first met Jack Kelshall in 1950, shortly after the birth of the PPP when I went to Trinidad and was hounded out of that island. When I landed, I was told that I was a prohibited immigrant. Many other islands did the same thing to me. However, due to the infrequent air flights in and out of Trinidad at the time, the authorities could do nothing with me except keep me under intense police surveillance and shove me out on the next plane, which was due in 4 days.

My political friends in Trinidad decided to frustrate the authorities, and the day before I was to be expelled we dodged the persistent police. I was hustled into a car which took me from Port of Spain to San Fernando, to the posh home of Jack Kelshall. He put me up for a day or two, before I went back to Port of Spain, back to the police and out of the island in a few more days.

That was my first meeting with Jack. Thereafter, he gave support, mainly moral and financial, to our fledgling party. In the 1961 elections, he came over and joined the campaign, speaking at meetings in Leguan and other parts of Guyana. He was very popular and helped immensely in that campaign, which the Party won.

Many were impressed with his capabilities, his exceptional intelligence and winning personality. Eventually, the Party asked him to stay on and help the Party in government. This he did and spent the next 4 years in Guyana, under, sometimes, very trying conditions. He

was appointed Special Secretary, or Personal Secretary to the Premier, Cheddi Jagan, serving well in that capacity. When the CIA-fomented riots and violence erupted, Jack became the target of the PNC's vile attacks. Peter D'Aguiar, too, mounted a massive campaign "Jack Go Back." He was also the pivot of all the the filthy attacks from X-13 and the PNC/UF/TUC unholy alliance which sought to oust the PPP from office.

Jack's work was not only the gruelling, time-consuming responsibilities as the Premier's right hand, he took on many tasks within the Party and became an integral part of the party machinery. Older Party members will remember him for his magnificent contribution to our organisation which was named "Operation Build-Up" and which encompassed a complete re-doing of the organisational methods of the Party. He introduced efficiency, accountability and oiled well our Party's organisational machinery. He worked hard and long in his time spent away from government duties.

In fact, I remember Jack, who was not in good health, collapsing more than once on the job. We were all concerned, but he was like a dynamo; nothing could stop him. He was a great example to the rank and file members on how a leader should behave. His drive, his honesty, his integrity, his grit, his combativeness, his steel spine, gave courage to many in those difficult days of burning, rape and plunder by those destabilising our country.

At the end of the Party's term of office, and through the difficult 1964 elections, Jack did not leave us. But after that, he felt it was time to return to his homeland, to take care of his family, to build back his practice in order to educate his sons, and so he went home.

His life in Trinidad up to the time of his death this year, was full and useful. He took part in trade union activity, associating with the militant Oilfield Workers' Union and the sugar union. In a big protest march in the mid-seventies, he was arrested with other leaders and kept in jail for a long period, during which time he suffered grave ill health. He was later released because of serious deterioration in his health. It is of interest to note that during his jail term, he produced some excellent poetry.

Jack Kelshall was eulogised on his death as one of Trinidad's illustrious sons by Oilfield Workers Trade Unionist George Weekes and sugar worker leader Basdeo Panday.

Said his close friend Cheddi Jagan at his funeral:

“We knew and respected him for his dedication to duty, his keen mind, his excellence in all tasks he performed and for his love and devotion to the betterment of the oppressed, the hungry, the exploited.

“At the personal level, working with him on a day to day basis, I was highly impressed not only by his capabilities and proficiency, but moreso by his integrity, his honesty and his creativeness. His mind was always searching, examining, looking for new ideas, new approaches.

“I have only referred to Jack Kelshall’s life and contributions in Guyana, but of course the better part of his life was in his homeland where he made his contributions as a leading lawyer, a man who made an immense contribution to the Trinidad labour movement, a family man, a poet.

“To Jack’s family and close friends we offer our deepest sympathy and our belief that his name will live forever in the hearts of those who loved him and of those whom he served.”

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