

# BRITISH GUIANA: OUR VICTORY

Janet Jagan\*

**F**OR the third time in the last eight years the People's Progressive Party has won a decisive victory in British Guiana. These elections are significant internationally and for the Caribbean as well as for British Guiana itself.

The P.P.P. was the first stable political party formed in British Guiana. Its objective then was independence; its political philosophy was socialism. From these two goals the party has not swerved. In eleven years it has fought consistently for independence and today stands on the threshold to freedom. In his first words following the recent electoral victory, the party's leader, Dr. Cheddi Jagan, announced that he would now seek immediate independence—at least a year ahead of the time schedule of the Colonial Office.

The Party's first victory of 1953 was short-lived. After four and a half months in office the majority party was kicked out forcibly by British gun boats. The Constitution was suspended and the country was ruled from 1953 to 1957 by an Interim Government appointed by the Governor and a State of Emergency. Party leaders were jailed, interned and restricted, their homes raided, under police surveillance; meetings, processions, books were banned.

In this atmosphere, and during this period, colonial spokesmen were asserting that free elections would not be held until the left-wing section of the Party led by Dr. Cheddi Jagan was eliminated. There were some who swallowed this bait. The then chairman Mr. Forbes Burnham attempted to organise elections within the party to oust the left. This was exposed in time; but the result was that from 1955 to 1957 there were two separate parties in British Guiana calling themselves the P.P.P.; one was led by Mr. Burnham and one by Dr. Jagan. This, of course, precipitated racial antagonism which still divide the country. By 1957, the Colonial Office felt that the Party had been sufficiently weakened and allowed the first elections since the 1953 destruction of democracy. Contrary to all expectations, the P.P.P. led by Dr. Jagan won a majority of seats and

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formed the government. Mr. Burnham's group then changed its name to 'People's National Congress'.

During its four years in office the Party was obliged to work under a restricted colonial constitution. The power of its ministers was limited; they faced hostility from a civil service which was frequently unco-operative and a trade union movement dominated by leaders who had participated in the Interim Government of 1953-57.

However, the Party was able to forge ahead and seek solutions to the many problems of an impoverished people. It opened up and distributed 90,000 acres of lands to farmers and farmers' co-operatives. It began to solve drainage and irrigation problems and move to diversification of crops. The new Government opened wide the doors of the country. Trade delegations were received from Canada, U.S.A., West Germany, Hungary, Japan: delegations and visits were sent to Venezuela, Cuba, East Germany, India, etc. A trade deal with Cuba gave rise to a wave of criticism in certain circles. Rural health services were expanded; greater protection was given to workers in newly drafted laws; more teachers and midwives were trained; and new land settlement projects opened.

Despite these achievements, a hostile press worked daily to undermine the party's objectives. A new party, headed by a local industrialist, Mr. Peter D'Aguair, attempted first to conclude a pact with Mr. Burnham to defeat the P.P.P.; after the two failed to reach agreement mainly on the issue of leadership, Mr. D'Aguair formed what was known as the 'United Force'. This party spent close to a million dollars in its campaign to defeat the P.P.P. at the elections—using mainly the bogey of Communism. Vast quantities of U.S. printed propaganda flooded the country; free films were shown throughout the country.

The People's National Congress of Mr. Burnham campaigned mainly on a racial ticket, which eventually wound up in violent attacks on P.P.P. speakers. At one public meeting, Dr. Jagan was attacked so viciously by P.N.C. supporters that he had to have armed protection. The 1961 election campaign was one of the most difficult ever faced by the Party. It was up against bribery and wealth on the one hand and race and violence on the other. Policy issues were obscured in a campaign of hate and vilification. Only the P.P.P. put out a detailed and reasoned policy statement as its election manifesto. Voters were solemnly told that if the Party won, their homes and land would be confiscated, their family life destroyed, their old

folks eliminated. Yet the results of the elections were twenty seats for the People's Progressive Party, eleven for Burnham's P.N.C. and four for D'Aguiar's United Force. Thus once more, we won majority support, a vote of confidence for four years in office.

This victory means that the P.P.P. will press forward for independence. Although Messrs. Burnham and D'Aguiar have paid lip service to the demand for independence, it is significant to recall that Mr. Burnham did not join the call for independence when a British Guiana delegation held talks on the constitutional issues at the Colonial Office in 1960: his attitude then was 'self-government, not independence'. Mr. D'Aguiar has always been associated with conservative views, so it was vitally important for the future that the only party to lead the country to independence has been returned to office. And in the Caribbean, the Party's victory has been well received. Politically conscious people in the British West Indies have long been disillusioned with the weak leadership of the Adams, Williams and Manley; they regard the P.P.P. as the only Caribbean political party with a policy, the only socialist movement in the region. Many look to the P.P.P. to give the lead to more vigorous political action in the region.

The question most asked by foreign correspondents is: will the P.P.P. join the East or West bloc? The P.P.P. replies that it will pursue a neutralist policy patterned on that of Ghana and India. It intends to seek aid from any source, provided there are no strings.

## The Queen and the Common Market

What will be the position of the Queen if Britain joins the European Common Market? . . . This question is discussed in whispers in Whitehall but never in public.

*(Daily Express, September 11, 1961.)*

To Europe with the Queen. This is something that hardly anyone inside Parliament or outside has yet adequately considered.

*(Sunday Telegraph, September 10, 1961.)*

Our Queen in Europe.

*(Daily Telegraph, September 12, 1961.)*

Readers may be amused to recall that the September *Labour Monthly*, p. 413, discussed in some detail this 'question never before discussed', a fortnight before it was broached in the general press.