

# Fighting Bureaucracy And Believing In The People

by Janet Jagan

The People's Progressive Party (PPP) won office on three occasions, was deposed two times and worked in a government under colonial rule. That meant that the PPP governed internally, as the British held the key posts of finance, (in 1961, this portfolio was handed over to a PPP Minister) foreign policy, security and the civil service. Under those difficulties, and in the face of strong hostility from the Mother Country and the colossus of the north (USA), it was not easy going.

The PPP would be in office today if it were not for the rigged elections that have taken place since the CIA, MI 5 and other forces deposed the government in 1964. That is said in the context of what follows — an account of our truly remarkable achievements in the face of so many obstacles.

These achievements were won by our adherence to democratic methods and the techniques we used to overcome a bureaucracy built-in to prevent any substantial gains by the PPP. What we did, has some significance today in view of the battles elsewhere to overcome the built-in problems arising out of stultifying bureaucratic growth and dominance.

Of course, Guyana is a small country, a microcosm of what exists elsewhere. Yet, sometimes, even microcosms have lessons to teach.

When we took office for the second time in 1957 (the first, in 1953, lasted only 133 days and then the British moved in their marines and threw us out of office) we were five ministers in charge of agriculture, transport, education, health, housing, labour, trade and industry, community development and communications. As mentioned above, the key ministries were kept in the hands of the British colonialists.

How were we to make a success of what was before us? We chose the path of the people, closeness to the workers and peasants, keeping them informed of all we were doing, asking them to help with the problems and the finding of solutions.

We did our best to win over the bureaucrats whom we had to work on a day-to-day basis. We began slowly involving them in the work before us. For example, when we saw the need for more health services in the distant parts of the country, in the river and interior areas of Guyana, it was found that writing minutes and asking for doctors or nurses to make regular visits to certain points got us nowhere. They remained on paper in files tucked neatly away.

Then we began involving civil servants, who rarely left their desks, and knew very little of their own country. Trips were planned up rivers (Guyana is known as the land of many waters; it has numerous rivers with settlers along the banks) and key civil servants were asked to accompany the minister. We carried baskets of food as there are no such things as restaurants or snack bars and the trips became an adventure and something of a picnic, except that there was a lot of work to be done.

The civil servants saw the needs and sufferings of the people and could not help but be sympathetic. Soon we had full co-operation in getting pre- and post-natal clinics working, in all the preparations for travel of nurses and doctors and provision of equipment, funding, etc.

Before, it had seemed impossible to organise a wide network for interior health care. Soon it became a reality and gave much pleasure of achievement to those who had formerly sat glued to their desks every day.

Altogether, the health services grew as never before in other aspects, too. For example, government-paid rural doctors and City hospital specialists used to rip-off the poor people in fees which they were not supposed to charge, but did. A relentless campaign began to give the poor people the free medical care they were supposed to get. After many efforts, it finally worked.

It must be remembered that the People's Progressive Party had no say in the hiring or firing of civil servants. That was kept strictly in the hands of the British Governor. Thus, we had to work and succeed within that framework.

We found that when the ministers spent time at the grass roots level, meeting, organising and discussing with the people, there was more confidence in our government. The people understood our limitations and gave of their fullest.

They helped identify lands that could be cultivated and we unwound all the administrative knots which had kept the lands from the people. Guyana has always been fortunate in that a great portion of its lands has always belonged to the state. Ownership of private lands is relatively small in comparison to the amount of state lands, and state lands, can be leased to farmers. But before our government came into office, this was difficult to achieve because the bureaucracy created many obstacles.

The plantocracy, in its quest for a cheap and abundant labour force in and around the sugar plantations, had "bottled up" the land. We began opening up the land and settling farmers on a co-operative basis. We gave bonuses to farmers to plant the crops we needed, like coconut, so we could stop importing edible oil and produce our own copra to manufacture into coconut oil. It worked.

We began too, to overhaul our educational system and to orient it to local history, culture and life in Guyana, instead of its British orientation. Children were still reading about apples; but apples do not grow in Guyana. We built new schools in the countryside and encouraged families to start sending their girls to school instead of keeping them at home to do domestic work. That worked too.

And we began the process of ending the system of "dual control" of schools: government paying for the upkeep of the schools and teachers' salaries, while the Christian churches appointed and promoted the teachers and administered the schools — a system which was unsound educationally and discriminatory to non-Christians. Our initiative was welcomed by the people, but brought out the wrath particularly of the Catholic Church, which charged that we wanted to "communistise education".

We urged the development of co-operatives to purchase farm machinery and gave them all help and encouragement. Not just on paper, but in reality. Our ministers went out and talked to farmers, guided them, encouraged them and celebrated with them when they acquired machinery. At one time, a minister cracked a coconut and poured the water over the machine, instead of the traditional wine or champagne. We were making the people conscious of their own identity and their ability to rise up to solve their problems.

As a result, in our second term of office from 1957 to 1961, rice production went up 72 per cent; copra 32 per cent; Ground provisions 118 per cent; livestock 39 per cent; milk 25 per cent; poultry 26 per cent and fisheries 77 per cent. Our efforts paid off. The people felt close to their government and were happy in its successes.

We were careful to avoid corruption. We had a bad shake up in the early period. One of our five ministers was suspected of using information to enhance himself and make a lot of money. He was removed from office. We made it clear from the very start that we would stand for no nonsense, no corruption, no personal material gains. Ministers were not allowed to accept gifts of any kind in any form or from anyone. We nipped in the bud one of the worst evils a government can face.

When our first public low income housing scheme was finished, we faced the problem of how to allocate these much needed dwellings without patronage or favouritism. The minister along with the civil servants in the ministry, who by that time were working well and not like bureaucrats, worked out a fair and equitable system based on the needs of families. Those living under the worst conditions, the greatest overcrowding and who had the most children to house were given first priority.

A points system was worked out and adhered to and it worked well. There were no charges of bribery or playing favourites or giving Party members first preference. But to keep the allocations working properly took a great deal of management, checks and more checks.

When land (17½ acres) was being distributed in a Land Settlement Scheme, a big hue and cry went up that the wrong people had been given the first 100 plots. The process was halted and a fair system of allocation was worked out based on need. Then it was found that some people were providing false information. Therefore all forms had to be properly attested. And the procedure was adopted to read out the application forms at a public meeting of the applicants to ascertain the veracity of the claims made on the application forms.

Because of our many restraints, many of them financial, we had to try to do things in a realistic way without overspending or aiming beyond what was possible. We needed to expand electricity, for at that time only the city of Georgetown was served. We had to expand our

transport services and we dearly wanted a university for Guyana.

Without spending much, we began our university as a night school in the main high school of Georgetown. How our enemies laughed at us! They called it "Jagan's night school". But we made a start and began in a small way the University of Guyana which has grown into a full-fledged university, offering higher education to those who never before had a chance.

What should have taken three years to establish according to UNESCO advisers — the need for buildings and professors — we achieved in one year with late afternoon and evening instruction through the utilisation of this secondary school building and teachers and professors who had been witch-hunted in the McCarthyite red-witching era in the united States.

We had a super river boat, capable of ferrying a large number of vehicles and passengers across our wide rivers, constructed in England. Then, we had two more constructed in the same manner, made locally. The three river boats, crossing Guyana's three main rivers daily, were a solution to a problem that had nagged the nation for years.

We nationalised the Canadian-owned electricity plant, modernised it and extended electricity to the rural areas, lighting them up for the first time ever. We made the electricity company profitable without increasing fees to the consumers. How? By good management, democratically run.

Because of our simple achievements and our closeness with the working people, we were voted back into office in 1961, even though the British tried to prevent this by manipulating the boundaries of the constituencies.

We stood for democratisation of all government institutions. We insisted and won the democratisation of the Rice Marketing Board, the selling agent of the farmers' rice, by putting farmers in a commanding position. Prior to 1957, the Guyana Rice Marketing Board had 16 members, with the statutory farmers' Rice Producers' Association (RPA) having only 8. Whenever there was a clash the chairman, drawn from one of the colonial government's 8 nominees, used his casting vote against the interest of the rice farmers.

The PPP government amended the law and gave the RPA 11 out of the 16 members. And because the far-

mers had a dominant voice in their own industry, it flourished, production increased at a phenomenal rate and the farmers prospered. The board that governed the electricity company was also made up largely of workers. We found that democratisation worked and we sincerely believed and applied this concept in all things we did.

All this was later undone when we were kicked out of office in 1964. Now, without democratisation, without even the right to free and fair elections, the country is bankrupt. Production has plummeted so much, that this sugar, bauxite and rice producing country cannot produce to satisfy foreign markets and provide enough rice and sugar for local consumption. Now the government is importing sugar for local consumption.

Working people work hard for their country when they know that they really have a say in what goes on. Remove this and everything falls, including production, co-operation and good will.

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