

The Role Of The People's Progressive Party In The History Of Guyana

(Condensed version of address given by PPP Executive Member Janet Jagan at first session of the 25th Congress of the PPP)

Our Party was the first stable political party in Guyana. We introduced politics to the masses, educating them about political life at public meetings and seminars, the first to be held on a wide scale in the country. It was the PPP which began the political education of Guyanese, making them aware of their rights, the need to run their own affairs and to have Guyanese, instead of expatriates, in positions of power.

In its first programme issued in April, 1950, the Party set out as its aims the objectives of winning independence and establishing a just socialist society.

The Party fought to bring full and genuine democracy to Guyana. In doing so, our Party advanced the limited franchise to universal adult suffrage, allowing all adults to vote for the first time in the nation's history.

We began the long struggle to end dual control of schools, which forced Christianity, in a multi-religious society, on teachers and students. Eventually we won the change to a state-controlled school system.

We ended the system of nominated members being appointed to Parliament. We fought against the undemocratic system which allowed, for example, the nomination of the sugar boss, Mr. Seaforth to the Legislative Council when he had lost the seat he contested in elections in 1947.

We fought against, and eventually won, the end of nominated members to the Executive Council of government, bringing in for the 1953 elections, the first cabinet system in Guyana.



Ms. Janet Jagan

Our party fought for, and finally won, the right of union members to choose, by free and fair ballot, the union they wanted for negotiations and representation. For years, sugar workers were forced to join the MPCA, the company union, until they finally won the battle to join the union of their choice, GAWU.

The Party fought against the undemocratic system of the British in fiddling and gerrymandering our constitution and the boundaries of constituencies.

In our battle to restore full democracy, we fought against the British-imposed laws of detention without trial.

The PPP fought and won an overwhelming majority of seats and votes in the 1953 elections which ushered in universal adult suffrage, self government, the cabinet system; these elections brought the unity of the Guyanese people as never before seen.

We saw the suspension of the constitution in 1953, becoming the cold war victims of US and British foreign policies. Constitutional life was ended until 1957, with a fully nominated Parliament taking over. The British colonial government worked tirelessly to divide the people's forces, succeeding in the split in the PPP and the formation, by Mr. Burnham, of another party, which at first he called the PPP, later the PNC. His group lost heavily in the 1957 elections, winning only three of 14 seats.

This technique of dividing the party, mainly on racial lines, was the method used by the British to hold its colonies together. Nelson Mandela in his recent autobiography cites how, when in prison, the authorities gave better food and clothing to Indian and coloured prisoners as against Black prisoners, trying to divide them on racial lines.

Despite the split and the gerrymandering of constituencies for the 1957 election, our Party won. An example of the gerrymandering was that Cheddi Jagan won his Corentyne seat with 23,443 votes, more votes than all of those won by the five parties other than the PPP which won seats in that elections. (The PPP won nine out of fourteen seats).

During the period 1957-61, our Party in government worked with the British Governor and top officials here without problems; we led a successful government within the colonial system and brought greatly increased benefits to the working man and woman. This record was well remembered during the 1992 elections, as voters compared conditions of the two periods.

It was our third success at winning elections, in 1961, that the cold war climate began seriously affecting our Party in government. The USA

greatly feared the influence of Cuba and charged that Guyana was going to be a second Cuba in this hemisphere. The US greatly influenced British colonial policy in Guyana. We then entered the period of activities by the CIA and British MI5 to destabilise our government. The opposition parties, the PNC and United Force, plus the TUC, worked closely with the CIA to undermine our Party and government, attempting to blow up Freedom House and fostering racial differences which led to the loss of lives and property.

The PNC, along with the UF, were catapulted into office in a coalition after the 1964 elections, brought one year beforehand and introducing proportional representation, which was aimed at removing our Party from government. Even though our Party won the largest number of votes of any party, the forced marriage of the PNC and UF kept us out of office.

Thus began 28 years of misrule and electoral fraud. Our members were harassed, imprisoned, searched, tortured, persecuted and suffered discrimination at all levels, bringing on the great exodus from Guyana. We experienced an economic downturn which created greater poverty, a severe drop in social services, the wrecking of the country's infrastructure and the demoralisation of the nation's citizens.

The assault on democracy highlighted this period with the gross rigging of elections.

The long battle to restore democracy began, first with the PPP's exposure of the electoral fraud of the 1968 elections. Little or no support was given to the PPP's struggle then, or even in the violent and heavily rigged elections of 1973. The Party boycotted the National Assembly for three years, protesting the electoral fraud. The Party eventually decided to return to Parliament, adopting a policy of "critical support" after extensive consultations with Party's rank and file.

The Party continued its exposure of electoral fraud, gradually bringing wider support for the restoration of democracy and the formation of the PCD after the 1985 elections.

Our General Secretary was successful in widening international support for our struggle to end electoral fraud, bringing in the Carter Centre, which gave such substantial help in changing the rules of the electoral process and in bringing free and fair elections to Guyana on October 5, 1992.

Our Party's role in the history of Guyana is uncontested, we helped form all the important changes in our country during the past 45 years.