

CHEDDI JAGAN: 50 Years as a Parliamentarian

by Janet Jagan, MP

The October 8, 1947 Political Affairs Bulletin, printed at our residence at 30 Queen Street, Kitty, a small back cottage which we were renting at, I believe, \$30 per month, announced that the "date for the belated General Elections is now definitely fixed for November 24". The PAC Bulletin, first published on Wednesday, 6th November, 1946 had set out the aims of the newly formed Political Affairs Committee which were "To assist the growth and development of the labour and progressive movements in British Guiana, to the end of establishing a strong, disciplined and enlightened party, equipped with the theory of scientific socialism". On the masthead of this first mimeographed (by hand, not machine) publication were the names of the members of the committee: "Janet Jagan, Ashton Chase, H.J.M. Hubbard and Cheddi Jagan" and gave as its address the home cum dental surgery which we then occupied at 69 Main Street, Georgetown. Later the landlord forced us out of the premises and we had to move - the dental surgery to 199 Charlotte Street and our living quarters to Queen Street, Kitty.

Before this announcement of general elections, the PAC Bulletin had been urging an early date for general elections, which had not been held for years, since before World War II. Registration for new elections had started in July 1946. In its February 26, 1947 edition, PAC had bemoaned the long delay in announcing elections, commenting that "Any prolongation of the date for general elections keeps the present Legislative Council in power to "railroad" through bills that a more representative council would never pass" noting that the "people's voice will be heard more strongly in the coming elections. There will be fewer Councillors representing vested interests and more Councillors representing the masses in the future Legislative Council. It is to their advantage to continue in power as long as possible and to delay and postpone the date for General Elections."

The 1947 elections were a great challenge and opened the door to the possibility of changing the status quo from dominance by the colonial powers and their strong supporters, Big Business and King Sugar, to the representatives of Labour.

In those elections, the four members of the PAC took part - H.J.M. Hubbard ran as an independent labour candidate for North Georgetown; Ashton Chase, then a very young man, supported the candidature of Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow, the leader of the British Guiana Labour Union; Cheddi Jagan for the constituency of East Coast Demerara (from Kitty to Buxton) and myself for Central Georgetown. The only winner of the four was Cheddi Jagan who won a stunning victory over an array of candidates, the main one being the former holder of the seat, John D'Aguiar.

There was in existence at that time a Labour Party, not very well organised, not as strongly 'labour' as it should have been, but nevertheless it was a labour party. However, it did not want any of the PAC candidates on its list so Hubbard, myself and Cheddi Jagan fought as 'independent labour'. In my own case, I can mention that I never had the slightest inclination to be a candidate, but my husband literally "forced" me to speak one night at the St. George's School and my candidature was declared. I was very shy and had a difficult time campaigning, but I had strong support from two leading Transport and Harbours trade unionists, Ivo Cendrecourt and F.O. Van Sertima, and did not do too badly, coming in second to John Fernandes.

However, the real campaign took place in East Demerara where Dr Jagan was the candidate who aroused strong feelings and made his public debut into politics. Not that he was not engaged in political life before this, but he was now being seen and heard. He was so impressive! He brought excitement, glamour, controversy and very strong feelings to the electorate, which at that time was a restricted franchise. Nevertheless, he was not only addressing the limited number of voters, he was talking to workers, villagers, housewives, students and the whole community. The people were thrilled, they were intrigued by his new ideas, his vigour, his very pleasing and exciting personality, the

totality of which was what we call charisma. But more than this was his message that it was time for the workers to have their say; it was the time for the exploiters of the working people to take a back seat and for people's power to be installed.

Of course, the message went over very well. Guyanese had for too long accepted and not challenged the whole colonial system, which was that of exploitation. Cheddi Jagan opened the eyes of those to whom he addressed at open air meetings up and down the East Coast. This was probably the first time that open air, street corner public meetings were being held at elections, as in the past, the candidates talked to the electorate in school and community buildings.

The December 17, 1947 issue of PAC Bulletin observed: "For the first time in the history of BG, the common man has had a real chance of voting and he did take this opportunity to lay his imprint on the ballot box. That the people were interested and aroused can be shown by the fact that such a large percentage (71.5%) voted on November 24. No longer can it be said that the people are not politically conscious. It is indeed a welcome sign that people are ready for universal adult suffrage. Labour has been returned triumphant. The representatives of capital and privilege have been rudely awakened . . . Labour, however, will have to solve the question of race. This, it can only do by replacing the question of race by the one of class. The rich and poor of one particular race do not have the same interests. It is the poor and exploited of all races who have a common interest, that of improving working and living conditions." Thus spoke the voice of the group that was to form the People's Progressive Party in January 1950. By this time Mr. Hubbard, who had not done well in the elections and who had faced severe racial attacks, had dropped out of PAC, but two important members had joined - Ram Karran and Sydney King (later to be known as Eusi Kwayana).

The Labour Party did not last long after elections and this no doubt spurred on the PAC to push for the formation of a party, which it did two years later.

One of the ironies of the entry of Dr Cheddi Jagan into the Legislative Council was the refusal of the white, business elite to recognise his qualities. Not wishing to acknowledge that a young man from a sugar estate, with illiterate parents, could match them in oratory and the discipline to research and investigate material for debates, etc., they accused him of memorising speeches prepared by his white American wife, me. For a very long period, this elitist group refused to appreciate Dr Jagan's excellent qualities as a parliamentarian, until it became evident that he could not memorise hours of speeches, as took place, for example when he addressed the Legislative Council for a very long period, in a bid to delay a piece of legislation he abhorred. The elite also discovered something else in Dr Jagan. In the past they had bought out, with favours and other malpractices, so called 'labour' MPs. The longer and louder they talked, the higher the bid. But in Dr Jagan, they encountered a man who could not be bought or won over. Later, when his lasting qualities influenced Parliament, these same people learned to respect him, even though they differed from his views.

November 24, 1997 will mark fifty years since Dr Cheddi Jagan entered Parliament. During that time his influence on the political life of this country has been enormous. It will take time for historians to evaluate his tremendous contribution to and influence on the life of our country. It is certain that he stirred the conscience and opened the eyes of his countrymen and women. He led the way to change. The impressive development which took place during his last term in office remains the pinnacle of his long and illustrious political career.

He led his party to victory in the 1953 elections, those of 1957 and 1961 and, although a coalition was formed after the 1964 elections, his party had the largest number of votes of any single party in those elections which introduced proportional representation. And after 28 years as opposition leader, he fought for and won free and fair elections after four heavily rigged elections carried out by the PNC, leading the winning party in the 1992 elections.

As a parliamentarian, Dr Jagan introduced the “politics of protest”. He brought the street (working people) to Parliament and took the parliament to the people. He attended sittings when they advanced the struggle of the people and boycotted when the Assembly became a farce as a result of PNC elections riggings.

Dr Jagan thus made parliament into a revolutionary forum. And when he was returned to office, in 1992 Dr Jagan made parliament into a truly representative, deliberative and participatory forum. At his insistence Hansards re-appeared, and Special Select Committees of the House were introduced as an essential component of parliamentary life.

From 1947 to the time he became President, and thus, no longer a sitting member of Parliament, Dr Jagan was an active member of the legislature, even when his mouth was gagged in the 1985 to 1992 Parliament when he was denied the right to speak.

As a person who worked side by side with this remarkable man all through his political career, which ended in his death in March this year, I wish to record my personal tribute on this 50th anniversary of his entry to Parliament. His worth and his contributions to his country are beyond measurement. These are everlasting and will continue to be respected and honoured by future generations.