

Address by Janet Jagan at the Opening of the National Archives

Annual Exhibition "Struggle for Independence" May 24, 2004

The concept of independence for the then British Guiana burst forth in the early 1940's in the writings of Cheddi Jagan. Before his entry to the political arena, the thought may have been enunciated in the early part of the last century, but not so clearly.

We have it in one of Dr. Jagan's earliest writings, published in November 1945 under the title "Cooperative Way" when he wrote: "It therefore behoves the working class people to get control of government through their Constitutional ballots in our forthcoming election, with a view towards complete independence. A free and independent Guiana can easily cooperate and eventually federate with her Latin neighbours, especially Brazil." The thrust of his article then, 59 years ago, was to move to co-operatives in the transition period, and he was a strong advocate of the co-op movement. He remains unchallenged as the man who initiated the struggle for Guiana's independence.

When the Political Affairs Committee (PAC) was formed one year later in 1946, it set out as its major goal the formation of a political party that would unite the workers to struggle for their inherent rights. The four persons who originated PAC, Ashton Chase, H.J.M. Hubbard, Cheddi Jagan and myself were all trade unionists. From our experiences and analysis, we had come, to the conclusion that the trade union movement could struggle for workers' rights, but could not move to the larger area of struggle – against colonialism and imperialism, for constitutional changes, etc.

Thus, when the PAC fulfilled its mission and the People's Progressive Party was formed in January 1950, its Manifesto stated:

"The People's Progressive Party recognising that the final abolition of exploitation and oppression, of economic crises and unemployment and wars will only be achieved by the socialist reorganisation of society, pledges itself to the task of winning a free and independent Guiana a society in which security, plenty, peace and freedom shall be the heritage of all."

Thus began the struggle for independence. The PPP led Freedom Marches, vigils, picket lines, held demonstrations, distributed handbills, petitioned the United Nations three times, lobbied overseas, put motions in Parliament, held countless public meetings, members went to jail, books were written, lectures delivered, and above all, people learned and understood the meaning of independence and the spirit of independence permeated the land.

In the early 1950's the PPP began a campaign for the first stage of independence – self government and carried out a country-wide signature campaign, making demands for a self-governing constitution. As a result of its agitation, the Colonial Office responded with the establishment of the Waddington Constitution Commission which came to British Guiana and held hearings. The PPP put forward specific demands for universal adult suffrage, a wholly elected legislature, a Cabinet of elected ministers and other changes.

The British then called elections under the new Constitution which introduced for the first time universal adult suffrage. At the April 1953 general elections, the PPP, despite a heated smear campaign, won an overwhelming number of seats and formed the government. For the first time in Guiana's history, three women entered the House of Assembly – Jane Phillips Gay, Jessie Burnham and myself. For the first time, elected Guianese were ministers – Dr. Cheddi Jagan as the head of the Legislative group and Minister of Agriculture, L. F. S. Burnham as Minister of Education, Ashton Chase as Minister of Labour, Sydney King as Minister of Works, Jainaraine Singh as Minister of Local Government and Dr. Lachhmansingh as Minister of Health.

The PPP government lasted only 133 days, with the British suspending the Constitution in October 1953 and bringing British troops to occupy the country.

This was the period when the Cold War was in full swing. The removal of the PPP government came only six weeks after the British and US governments had collaborated to throw out of office Prime Minister Mossadeq of Iran who had nationalised the British owned oil refineries in Iran, and, as a consequence, lost massive sums of money that then went into the Iranian Treasury. And shortly afterwards, the Arbenz Government of Guatemala was also removed in the continued effort to rid the world of progressive governments.

There are now released secret documents from the British concerning the delegation from those opposed to the PPP in 1953, who went to England to applaud the suspension of the Constitution. The delegation included John Carter, Lionel Luckhoo, R. Kendall and businessmen Messers Fernandes and Dare, who obviously had helped to conspire to bring about the removal of the duly elected PPP government.

In the aftermath of the suspension of the Constitution, many went to jail, repressive measures were taken by the British to suppress the people, including curfews, orders restricting Party leaders, a ban on meetings, etc., and an Interim Government, hand picked by the British, despised by the population, was put in place. The British succeeded in splitting the PPP, with Mr. Burnham then forming the People's National Congress.

When elections were eventually restored, in 1957, the PPP again won, as it did again in 1961, both times surmounting strong efforts by the British to alter constituency boundaries in order to defeat the PPP.

In December, 1961, Cheddi Jagan addressed the Fourth (Trusteeship) Committee of the United Nations, petitioning for Guiana's independence. He said :

"We the peoples' representative of the British Crown Colony of British Guiana would like to draw the attention of the honourable delegates to our unfortunate plight. The foundation Charter of this Honourable Assembly stands to uphold human rights and preserve and restore the dignity of man. In unmistakeable terms it advocates that political independence is the birthright of each and every country and also, that a nation ought to have the right and freedom to manage its own affairs in the light of agreed national ideals and aspirations. Unhappily, here in British Guiana colonialism has chosen a course which violates the principles set in the United Nations' Charter, denies the Guianese masses the right to immediate political independence; and thus saps and undermines the dignity of human mind and soul, which the Honourable Assembly has been so nobly and assiduously trying to maintain."

He said further : "We want to run our national affairs, political, social and economic, according to the wishes and aspirations of our peoples and for a better Guiana." In the 18 page document, in the files of the Cheddi Jagan Research Centre, Dr. Jagan said he rejected the Colonial Offices' proposals which fell short of promises given before and which would, he said, conspire to defraud the Guianese people of their birthright of being free and independent.

Dr. Jagan on July 23, 1962 addressed the Committee of 17 of the United Nations and I addressed the Special U.N. Committee of 24 on the ending of colonialism on May 8, 1964.

The Colonial Office under an agreement reached at Lancaster House in March 1960, in preparation for independence, promised full internal self government in August 1961. Under the agreement, which accepted the principle of independence, it would be necessary for the Constitution to be in force for two years prior to a request by the legislature for independence. That would mean that independence would be granted around 1963. But this was not to be.

Other forces were at work to prevent this. The notorious Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the USA and other forces were active in Guiana, funding and encouraging the political opposition and trade union groups to foment mayhem and riots in order to destabilise the legitimately elected government of the PPP led by Premier Cheddi Jagan. Their aim was to make impossible the date set for independence, and they succeeded. Hundreds of lives were lost in deliberately provoked ethnic clashes, fire and bombs were used to destroy houses and buildings putting the country into chaos. From my own experience as Minister of Home Affairs in 1963-64, I can attest to the fact that the British Commissioner of Police contributed to all of this.

A letter, recently declassified, a secret document from President John F. Kennedy dated March 6, 1962 illustrates conclusively the role of the USA in preventing independence from being achieved, as promised by the Colonial Office, for 1963.

"To: The Secretary of State

Subject: British Guiana

No final decision will be taken on our policy toward British Guiana and the Jagan government until (a) the Secretary of State has a chance to discuss the matter with Lord Munster in Geneva, and (b) Hugh Fraser completes his on-the-spot survey in British Guiana for the Colonial Office.

The questions which we must answer before we reach our decision include the following:

1. Can Great Britain be persuaded to delay independence for a year?
2. If Great Britain refuses to delay the date of independence would a new election before independence be possible? If so, would Jagan win or lose? If he lost, what was the alternative?
3. What are the possibilities and limitations of United States action in the situation?

While all these manipulations were taking place, and under what was extreme US pressure, the British changed its plans, cut one year off the PPP's term of office, which went up to 1965, introduced proportional representation as yet another ploy to prevent the PPP from holding office, and called elections for 1964. The PNC campaigned under the slogan of "No Independence Under Jagan," both in 1961 and 1964, showing its limited interest in supporting independence unless on its terms.

Whilst the PPP won the largest number of votes of any single party, it did not receive an overall majority. This set in place the stage for the coalition of the PNC and the United Force, which then formed the government.

Seventeen months later, Independence was granted and at the flag lowering ceremony, which despite all that had gone before, Dr. Jagan, his son and his former Finance Minister Dr. Charles Jacob, Jr., attended. Guyana's flag was raised on May 26, 1966 and we became an Independent nation.

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