

THE FEBRUARY REVOLT

Cheddi Jagan

ON FEBRUARY 26, 1970, there undoubtedly began the most significant development in the revolutionary wave that will sweep away colonialism and neocolonialism from the Caribbean. In a period of nearly two months, the Williams regime of Trinidad and Tobago was shaken to its foundations. The telling slogans, "Doc, Remember the R.C. Church was against you in 1956" and "Williams is keeping us in Capitalism and Slavery," showed that politics had turned a full circle and time had caught up with the doctor.

Dr. Eric Williams with his People's National Movement (PNM) rose to power on the crest of the national, anti-colonial wave started in the pre-war and post-war periods by Butler, Bustamante, Adams, Critchlow, Edun, and others. His was a brilliant academic career with the excellent *Capitalism and Slavery* to his credit. And then he was given a gift on a platter for launching himself on a political career — the Anglo-American Caribbean Commission had refused to promote him to its top post as Secretary-General.

With this background, it was only natural that Williams would sweep the polls at the 1956 general election. He capitalized on the betrayal of the working class by Albert Gomes. At Woodford Square, which he dubbed "University of Woodford Square," with incisive logic, he inveighed against British colonialism and its puppet Albert Gomes. He attacked the Roman Catholic Church and its control of

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the schools. The US base at Chaguaramas was the central point of attack which ended on April 22, 1960, with a 15,000-strong protest march (Janet Jagan and Jack Kershall participating) that he led demanding "Americans, go home!"

Fourteen years of unbroken PNM rule had not, however, brought about any fundamental social change. Nationalism and pragmatism, the cornerstone of Williams's philosophy, resulted in little more than formal independence. The PNM studiously avoided the word socialism. In fact, it objected to its inclusion in the Caribbean-wide party formed by Norman Manley, Grantley Adams, Vere Bird, etc., for the federal (West Indies Federation) election in 1958.

Without any firm Marxian-socialist ideological base, the approach of the Trinidad and federal leadership was largely opportunistic. Narrow nationalism and chauvinism which dominated the area were fostered by the imperialist strategy of economic planning based on the creation of an investment climate and incentives to foreign capital. Instead of overall regional planning and development and territorial specialization, unbridled competition set in. The end result was not only the break-up of the West Indies Federation, but also poverty and misery on a vast scale. In the period 1950-60, instead of the creation of 413,000 jobs in the federal territories to solve the unemployment problem, the unemployment rate in the most industrially developed island was about 15%.

Commenting on the grave unemployment situation in Trinidad, the *Trinidad Guardian* wrote on August 9, 1967:

One hundred jobs in Canada. The possibility of three hundred in Puerto Rico. A steady trickle of domestics to North America. A fairly large flow of skilled and professional people to Canada. These are the avenues being used or explored in a society where the rate of unemployment may not be the worst in the world, but is nonetheless unbearable.

Failure to solve grave social problems led to disenchantment, discontent and in some cases open revolt.

In Jamaica, the tweedledum-tweedledee politics of Sir Alexander Bustamante (Jamaica Labour Party) and Norman Manley (People's National Party) being incapable of solving the people's problems or of inspiring them, eventually led to a pitched battle between the underprivileged and unemployed and the lumpen proletariat, who styled themselves Ras Tafarians. The coercive apparatus of the state became more and more repressive. Passports and travel abroad were denied by the PNP government to Marxists like Richard Hart. The end result was the demise of the Manley government and, as the PPP predicted, the break-up of the West Indies Federation. It was ironic that the very man who could have saved the Federation was the one to deliver the last death blow. The Jamaican people, having been nurtured on a chauvinistic, cold-war, pro-imperialist domestic policy, could not have been expected to vote "yes" in a referendum to save the Federation.

A fate similar to Manley's met other "socialists" in the Caribbean. Sir Grantley Adams, the Prime Minister of the West Indies Federation, fell in the face of Errol Barrow's demagoguery.

In Antigua, for many years, the unchallenged leader winning all the seats in successive elections was "socialist" Vere Bird. His union-party combination is now split and his opposition can at any time muster more people in street demonstrations. In 1967, Bird's government refused me permission either to lecture under University of the West Indies auspices or to address a public open-air meeting.

Under the so-called labour but rightist leadership of the Bustamante-Shearer regime, the coercive state machinery has been brought into full play. At the beginning, this

was restricted to the denial of academic freedom. Passports were seized and Jamaican academics were denied the right to travel. The banning from Jamaica of Dr. Walter Rodney (later, Dr. Clive Thomas and Cheddi Jagan Jr.), and street demonstrations of students, workers and unemployed were met with soldiers' bullets. Four were shot dead.

"BLACK POWER"

These events were only the build-up to the eruption in Trinidad. The regime of Dr. Williams, not leftist but pragmatist with an aura of intellectualism, moved more and more to the right.

The confrontation with the Catholic hierarchy never materialized. The US imperialists were allowed to keep part of Chaguaramas. The Industrial Stabilization Act banned the right to strike. A long list of progressive literature, including the PPP's *Guyana Information Bulletin*, was banned. In 1957, on our way to the Ghana Independence Celebrations, Burnham was permitted free movement in Trinidad while I was restricted to a room in the Piarco Airport Terminal building. Trinidad-born Stokely Carmichael was refused entry.

Apart from political independence, other promises — morality in public affairs and widespread participation in political and economic life — were not fulfilled. The white imperialist socio-economic structure was unchanged. Trinidadians of European descent earned an average income of \$500 a month, as compared with \$104 for Africans and \$77 for those of East Indian extraction.

Lack of accomplishment, glib pseudo-intellectual talk and corruption led from the landslide victory of 1958⁶ to waning interest and a steady erosion of the PNM's position. From a high of 80% of the electorate turning out to vote in

1956, the figure steadily dropped to 73% in 1958; to 65% in 1966; and to a low of 34% in a by-election in 1968. The PNM's popular support also fell drastically.

Dr. Williams's charisma suffered its first blow in the federal elections in 1958 when the Bustamante-Bhadase Maraj federal alliance swept the polls in Trinidad. In the subsequent years, as Williams's popularity waned and a growing gulf developed between promise and performance, he became more removed from the people. The "University of Woodford Square" was deserted, and bribery, corruption, fraud, discrimination and contempt of opposition and criticism became the hallmarks of the regime. The opposition shouted that elections were fraudulent, that the voting machines were fixed. In these circumstances, confrontation was inevitable.

The February revolt was initiated by the National Joint Action Committee (NJAC) led by Geddes Granger. The catalyst was the trial in Montreal, Canada, of ten Trinidadians who formed part of the 87 West Indian and Canadian students who were arrested for "conspiring to burn down the computer centre at Sir George Williams University" (SGWU).

The NJAC was set up in 1969 for the purpose of establishing solidarity with these students who had charged a white biology professor with racism. Its base was the University of the West Indies at St. Augustine.

In early 1969, as a protest to the SGWU affair, the students closed the University, stopped and boarded the train into Port of Spain, scaled the fence of Whitehall (official headquarters of the Prime Minister), lodged strong protest with the PM and the Canadian High Commissioner.

Later in 1969, Granger and the students formed a human barricade at the main gate to the St. Augustine campus and

prevented the entry of Sir Ronald Mitchener, the Governor-General of Canada, who was visiting Trinidad on an official tour.

On February 26, 1970, on the occasion of the trial of the 10 Trinidadians in Montreal, Granger and a small group of NJAC colleagues made the Canadian banks and property the targets of their attack. They dramatized their protest march by occupying the Roman Catholic cathedral. With placards calling for "Freedom Now" and the clenched-fist "black power" salute, they shouted for "power" and draped black hoods over the statues. Explaining their entry into the cathedral, Granger told his followers:

The Roman Catholic church is white; God is white; Jesus is white; the Apostles (except perhaps Judas) were white; all the angels and saints (save the few hastily added the other day) are white.

The Trinidad and Tobago government responded to this first wave of protest by agreeing to pay the fines (about TT\$67,000) imposed on the Trinidad students.

But this did not stop the NJAC. The protest shifted from the Canadian government to the Williams government and local conditions. The target was not the "white minority who control the significant majority economic wealth of Trinidad." On March 5, Granger told a crowd of 10,000:

Our movement is working towards the day when each black person will be able to get a fair deal, be he of African or East Indian descent, will be able to feel that he has a stake in the future of our society. We are, therefore, against the present system in Trinidad which can only result in the perpetuation of the status quo. In Trinidad we have a black government which is not working in the interest of the people, for they strive to perpetuate a system of capitalism, a system which serves to provide huge profits for the foreign firms like the Royal Bank of Canada, Alcan, or Texaco Trinidad. We cannot and indeed will not allow our black people to be further dehumanized. And I say to you, there must be change.

On March 6, when five of the nine leaders of the march into the cathedral were before the court on charges of assault and unlawful assembly, another mammoth demonstration broke out into violence. Shop windows were smashed, molotov bombs caused several fires, and some stores were looted. The home of Senator Donald Pierre, Minister of Education, was hit with a lighted "flambeau."

For another fortnight, the demonstrations grew in intensity. A fire bomb directed at a branch of the Royal Bank of Canada hit and burnt a garment factory owned by an Indian. The next day an apology issued that "black power" was not anti-Indian. To demonstrate this, Granger led, against the threats of gun-toting Bhadase Maraj, a 6,000-strong 20-mile march to the British-owned Tate and Lyle sugar plantation with the objective of declaring "war on Tate and Lyle" and uniting the Indians and Africans. There was the symbolic gesture that money earned by urban Africans in cutting canes was to be handed over to rural Indian sugar workers.

CARROT AND CLUB

The response to this growing unity and militancy was typical of the PNM regime. Minister of West Indian Affairs, Kamaluddin Mohammed, appealed for good sense. John O'Halloran, Minister of Industry, saw behind the "black power" demonstration "communist agitators trained and paid by Fidel Castro's Cuba." Dr. Eric Williams broke his long silence with a speech punctuated with platitudes and palliatives, with carrot and the club. He was in sympathy with "black power" if it meant black dignity, black consciousness, and black economic power. "Our young people are a part of the general world malaise. Ruthless, frustrated, possibly a little exuberant," they had a right to demonstrate. But "the law will take its course if what is involved is arson and molotov cocktails."

His carrot — a \$10 million annual unemployment fund from a special 5 percent levy on chargeable income of all companies paying income tax, including all banks and insurance companies—did not pacify the demonstrators. This was a plain case of too little too late.

The demonstrations continued. Ten days after one demonstrator was shot and wounded on March 25, police shot and killed an NJAC supporter, Basil Davis. On April 13, A. N. R. Robinson, Minister of External Affairs, resigned because he was not "*satisfied that a sufficient serious attempt is being made by the government to remove the underlying causes of the present situation in the country.*" A week later, Geddes Granger, George Weekes of the Oilfields Workers Union, Clive Nunez and others announced their intention to organize a protest march on April 21. Sugar workers, postal and other essential workers agreed to come out on a sympathy strike.

The confrontation was on. On April 20, Dr. Williams moved in with the "club." A state of emergency was declared and more than 50, including 12 principal NJAC leaders, were arrested and detained.

Meanwhile, nearly three-quarters of the Trinidad and Tobago regiment, under the rebel leader, Lt. Rex La Salle, revolted at their Teteron Bay headquarters. Williams called for outside help. The Venezuelan and US governments air-dashed arms and ammunition. US warships steamed into Trinidad waters and the British navy in the Caribbean was put on the alert. Venezuela moved troops on its border near to Trinidad. Within a week the rebels were pacified by what now appears to be a betrayal of trust.

The civilian and military leaders now face treason and sedition trials. Williams has regained the initiative and is hastily proceeding with a reformist programme, no doubt with the active support of the British and American im-

perialists who so quickly rushed to his support. While the leaders cool their heels in detention camps and go through frustrating legal battles, the forces of revolt carry out an agonizing reappraisal.

OPPOSITION AND REBEL FORCES

Opposition to the PNM regime has come from a mixed bag. The Democratic Labour Party (DLP) is the traditional parliamentary opposition. At the beginning it was led by Bhadase Sagan Maraj who, as a millionaire and leader of the Maha Sabha, practised politics which combined business and gangsterism with Hinduism. Serious illness of Maraj resulted in the leadership passing over to the late Dr. Rudranauth Capildeo, who was content to lead the party from London, where he carried on as a full-time professor. There was and is no concrete programme of change. All that was offered was a vague form of "democratic socialism."

Absentee and ineffectual leadership led to dissension and split of the DLP. Peter Farquhar, representative of local small-sized business and the French-creole, formed the Liberal Party. Stephen Maraj, with the help of C. L. R. James, George Weekes and others constituted the Workers and Farmers Party (WFP) just prior to the 1966 general election.

At the ¹⁹⁶⁶ general election, the voting machines gave the PNM 24 seats and the DLP 12. The Liberal Party and the WFP did not secure a single seat.

These parties failed largely because they were elitist in approach with no distinct programme and little or no pre- or post-election work among the masses. Dr. Capildeo and James were seen to be on an equal intellectual footing with Williams. Actually, the DLP tailed the PNM, always a step behind.

The NJAC brought together at first about 26 large and small groupings. Eventually, six groups constituted the core with Geddes Granger and Dave D'Abreu from UWI students, Clive Nunez and George Weekes from the trade unions, Aldwin Primus from the Black Panther group, and Errol Balfour from the Workers Educational Association (WEA).

As events developed, the NJAC was indentified with "black power". This led to some confusion among some Indo-Guyanese who attacked the PPP for supporting the NJAC. They identified the "black power" struggle as racist, not only anti-white, but also anti-Indian. It is true that the dynamic, militant and magnetic Granger was a "one-issue man," who without a coherent programme for change (the Marxist WEA was at one time expelled and subsequently brought back) saw blackness alone as the entire basis for a political movement. Nevertheless, this did not make him anti-Indian. Separately, Nunez and Weekes, in calling for nationalization of sugar and oil, had pointed the way. Even Vernon Jamadar, leader of the Indian-based DLP, was able to see that NJAC was not racist when he said:

What is going on is rather a struggle for social and economic status on the part of the deprived section of the society. If it happens that the line between those who are protesting and those protested against appears to follow a racial line one could interpret it as racialism, but I think that would be wrong—an over-simplification. The real point of the unrest is the situation in Trinidad after one and a half decades of PNM rule. Our problems are grave—unemployment, cost of living, nepotism, maladministration and incompetence.

Other opposition forces are Dr. James Millette's United National Independence Party (UNIP) and Lloyd Best's Tapia House. Millette and Best, formerly of the New World group, broke on the question of elections. UNIP sees the next election as the road to power, drawing multiracial sup-

port both from the African-based PNM and the Indian-based DLP. The Tapia House approach is not electoral politics from above, but "change from below" through education, community work and participatory democracy.

GAINS AND SETBACKS

The NJAC-led revolt has temporarily failed. But Trinidad will never be the same again. The legitimacy and so-called popularity of Eric Williams have been exposed. The PNM regime is no longer regarded as invincible. It will now rely more and more on force and fraud.

About the necessity for revolution in Trinidad, there can be no doubt. The relevant question in Trinidad, the rest of the Caribbean and Guyana is how to make the revolution. As I see it, there is need for a party of a new kind — Marxist-Leninist type. Had there been a party such as the PPP in Trinidad, there would have been a different ending to the February revolt.

US military presence in Trinidad waters clearly indicates that Caribbean revolutionary strategy and tactics must be internationalist-oriented and must synchronize with those of the Latin American revolution. Cuba, the Dominican Republic and now Trinidad have brought home clearly, as the PPP perceived, that the Caribbean is geographically a part of Latin America. West Indians and Guyanese must not fool themselves about their cultural, political and historical exclusiveness.

It is now clear that a revolutionary situation did not exist in Trinidad and Tobago. The objective and subjective factors were not mature for a revolution. Flushed with initial successes — the government's payment of the fines for the Trinidad students, and the 5% "black power" tax — and carried away by mass adulation, Granger felt that the population was ready for anything. In this he was mis-

taken. The strike movement collapsed after the declaration of the State of Emergency. Few defied the Emergency and came out in the streets. And after George Weekes's detention, there was little protest from his Oilfields Workers' Union, the most powerful in the country.

Clearly, enough preparatory work of an educational ideological, organizational and political nature had not been done. An almost spontaneous, "putschist" approach was adopted. The result was that although Granger was free for a few days after his colleagues were detained, there was no contingency plan of action.

Revolution is a serious matter, not something to be toyed with. It cannot come about spontaneously, nor can it be "pushed." Lenin always argued against those who advocated "pushing the revolution," and attacked the Blanquists who repudiated the class struggle, expecting the "emancipation of mankind from wage slavery to be brought about not by means of the class struggle of the proletariat, but through a conspiracy of a small minority of intellectuals."

In 1918, Lenin wrote:

Of course, there are people who believe that revolution can break out in a foreign country to order, by agreement. These people are either mad or they are provocateurs. We have witnessed two revolutions during the past 12 years. We know that revolutions cannot be made to order or by agreement; they break out when tens of millions of people come to the conclusion that it is impossible to live in the old way any longer.

Looking back, it seems that the best course for the NJAC was to consolidate its forces after the initial successes, build up a sound organization, work out an anti-imperialist programme, develop strong links with the working class in the sugar and oil belts, in the waterfront and in the communications systems, and confront the PNM regime at the 1971 general election on the issue of free and fair

elections without voting machines; in other words, the fight for democracy, in defence of the constitution, for national independence and against imperialism.

Confrontation on that basis would have brought a united opposition to Eric Williams, including legitimate support from the police and defence force. If he failed to concede, revolutionary armed struggle would have had a better chance of success.

Unfortunately, this course was not pursued probably because of ultra-leftist tendencies — not a flexible but a dogmatic boycott approach to the question of parliamentary struggle and elections; the role of a political party in a revolutionary struggle, etc.

In any case, the first round has been lost. But there is no turning back. Despite palliatives and capitalist reforms, the coming revolution can no longer be diverted and contained.

The Trinidad revolt must not be viewed in isolation. It must be seen as the last of a series of events in a region of turmoil, of instability. Mounting unemployment and underemployment, declining standards of living, uncertainties and frustrations in the Caribbean have led to a groundswell of discontent and to a people in revolt — popular uprising forcibly suppressed by US marines in the Dominican Republic; secession of Anguilla from the associated state of St. Kitts-Nevis-Anguilla; labour unrest in Antigua; labour disturbances in Curacao; anti-police riots in Montserrat; demonstrations leading to the resignation of the Pengel regime in Surinam; racial eruptions in Jamaica; disturbances in Guadeloupe; Rupununi (Guyana) secession attempt; "black power" confrontation in Trinidad and Tobago.

These and many more events must be seen as a new awakening of a people long oppressed and subjugated.

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The February revolt offers valuable lessons to Guyana in particular. It has demonstrated the impermanence of racism as a political tool. It is distilled experience for those Indo-Guyanese inside and outside the PPP who, on the false assumption that the "black people will never change, will never leave Burnham," argue either for a PPP compromise with imperialist USA or for an Indian Party.

Actually, Burnham's racist, neocolonialist regime is following closely on the heels of Williams's PNM regime. The only difference is Burnham's greater demagogic skill and the ease with which he employs leftist phraseology. Besides, Williams has been in office for fourteen years; Burnham for only six. Time has caught up with Williams. It will inevitably do likewise with Burnham and the other puppets.

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