



Towards Understanding ...

TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING.....

by

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PREMIER OF BRITISH GUIANA

*The Text of an Address to the National Press Club
Washington, D.C., U.S.A.*

October, 1961

National Press Club

CERTIFICATE OF APPRECIATION

to

Dr. Cheddi Berrett Jagan

Awarded in recognition of Meritorious Service to Correspondents
of Press, Radio and Television in the Nation's Capital

24 October 1961
Date

Hubert H. Bayne
President



In his report to the British Guiana Legislative Assembly on his recent visit to Canada, United States and Puerto Rico Dr. Jagan stated that the objects of his visit were to explain the policy of his Government and to remove and erase as far as possible the misconceptions and misrepresentations which had appeared in the North American Press. It is generally agreed that his address to the National Press Club in Washington which is here reprinted went far towards bringing about a better understanding of his policy. In this photograph Dr. Jagan receives an enthusiastic standing ovation from members of the National Press Club at the conclusion of his address.

The Premier was also presented with the Certificate of Appreciation which is reproduced on the opposite page.

TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING.....

I am told that I am a controversial figure. I think therefore that my first duty today is to put my personal position before you as briefly and clearly as I can.

I am, I believe, generally dismissed in this country as a Communist. That word has a variety of meanings according to the personal views of the man who makes the charge. Some people, for example, said that General Eisenhower was a Communist. To others a Communist means simply a person who is in favor of a certain pattern of economic organization in which the State plays a direct and active part. Still others mean when they call you a Communist that you are a dedicated agent of what they call an "international conspiracy". During your own struggle to get rid of colonialism your leaders were called all sorts of names. For example, if the term had been known in his day General Lafayette would almost certainly have been called a Communist. Tom Paine whose writings fired the blood of your revolutionaries and inspired me during my student days here, was charged for seditious libel for publishing the "Rights of Man". An ex-colonial American Chief Justice John Reeves set up an organization in England called the Society for the Preservation of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers. And the leaders of your revolution were charged with conspiring with a foreign power — Jacobin France. I draw attention to these aspects of your history because I think it will help you to understand why I have so often been called names and had my views misrepresented and distorted. Let me now tell you where I stand.

First of all I am a passionate anti-colonialist. I, like your forefathers, believe that colonialism is wicked. I believe so strongly that colonialism is utterly wrong that I would gladly accept any help from whatever quarter to help me in my fight against it.

MY COUNTRY

My country is about the size of Great Britain or the State of Minnesota. It is a poor country but it has considerable unused resources and great possibilities for development. At the moment, however, most of its half a million people barely eke out a living on a narrow low-lying coastal strip of land which accounts for only four per cent of our land area. Although the country is mainly agricultural we still have to import many agricultural products. This is not the only paradox in our situation. In a country so largely unoccupied, there is also grave land hunger, for it takes great sums of money to reclaim and then protect cultivable land from floods, the sea and the jungle, and we have never been able to afford enough of these works.

There is almost no industry. My country depends on three or four main products — sugar, bauxite, rice and timber — the exploitation of two of which is in the hands of foreign companies. Indeed these two industries, sugar and bauxite, between them account for seventy-five per cent of the exports of the country.

British Guiana today in fact presents the typical pattern of a colonial economy. It is little more than a raw material base and a market for industrial products with the drain of wealth abroad which perforce results in stagnation and poverty.

SOCIALIST POLICY

I am dedicated to the task of changing this pattern. I wish to see my country prosperous and

developing, its people happy, well-fed, well-housed, and with jobs to do. Too many of them at the present time lack these elementary essentials. Second only to my passion for the independence of my people is this dedication to their economic advancement, so that their lives may be more abundant. Now, in this I am a socialist. By this I mean that I am in favor of the workers reaping the full fruits of their labor through public ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. I believe that it is only by planning on this basis and with a scientific assessment of our situation that I can rapidly modernize our economy and provide my people with the higher standards of living they want and have a right to expect.

I believe ideally in the nationalization of all the important means of production, distribution and exchange. This will ensure a fairer distribution of a country's wealth than any other system. But I also have to recognize things as they are. While I reserve our right, as any sovereign nation does, to nationalize whatever industry we think should be nationalized in the public interest we have explicitly stated that we have no intention of nationalizing the existing sugar and bauxite companies. These companies today dominate our economy, but British Guiana is still largely under-developed. We are resolved to diversify our economy and to industrialize it rapidly so that as we launch new enterprises the proportion of our national income produced by expatriate enterprise becomes smaller and their present command of our economic life weakened. If on the other hand it ever became necessary to nationalize any industries, fair and adequate compensation would be paid.

In carrying out our program of industrialization the state will play an active and direct part. In this, our policy is, I believe, similar in aims to those followed by many other countries of the world, such as India, Ghana, Yugoslavia and Israel, all of which have received generous aid from America.

I place myself in company with other nationalist leaders of Asia and Africa. I believe like these nationalist leaders that the economic theories of scientific socialism hold out the promise of a dynamic and social discipline which can transform an under-developed country into a developed one in a far shorter time than any other system.

MAINTENANCE OF DEMOCRATIC WAY OF LIFE

We may differ from you on the way we organize our economic life. You have as your dominant philosophy private enterprise but let us not forget that your development took place in a different historical epoch when conditions — economic and technological — were not as they are today. It is however generally agreed now that in an under-developed country and in the face of the rising expectations of the people the State must play a more pervasive role. But we certainly do not differ from you in our political objectives which is the establishment and maintenance of a democratic way of life.

I have won my place in the political life of my country in three successive general elections. I have not come to power by revolution or coup d'etat. I believe in parliamentary democracy, by which I recognize the rights of opposition parties, freedom of speech, freedom of worship, regular and honest elections, an impartial judiciary and an independent civil service. I have been accused of plotting the destruction of freedom in my country. The truth is that those who accuse me of this have themselves been responsible for the denial of freedom to the broad masses of our people. I have struggled for these freedoms and it was I who first proposed that a Bill of Rights guaranteeing every citizen his fundamental rights, including the right to hold property, buttressed by an appeal to the courts, be entrenched in the new constitution of British Guiana. It was I who saw to it that these provisions which are unique in the region and which are not part of the British parlia-

mentary tradition but which are based on your own constitution were inserted in our new British Guiana constitution. I intend that the same rights shall be similarly entrenched in the constitution of an independent Guiana.

To carry out the program of social and economic reform I have in mind for my country I need both trade and aid. I have already pointed out the need for large scale industrialization if there is to be an improvement in the living standards of the Guianese people. Because of the small population and limited home market a programme for industrialization must be tied to export markets previously explored and secured. It is obligatory on us therefore to make trade agreements either on a government level or with privately-owned agencies wherever we can find markets.

PLACE IN THE WORLD

Finally, may I touch briefly on the place we hope to take in the world when our independence is achieved shortly. I mean to pursue a policy of active neutralism. Because of the immensity of our problems I am forced like India and some other under-developed countries to seek aid from all possible sources. I have however made no secret of the fact that I will not accept any aid upon conditions which limit the sovereignty of my people. We do not intend to be a bridgehead or a base for anyone. I am not the agent for what some call an international conspiracy. I take no orders from anyone. I am concerned only with the urgent problems of the social and economic development of my country. I am not interested in the cold war in which in any case my small country can play no effective role. Sensational headline writers sometimes lose their sense of proportion when they forget this.

That is not to say that I will not interest myself in the many problems of our twentieth century world, some of which are bound to affect us. We look

forward indeed in due course to taking our place in the United Nations which represents, particularly for small nations, their guarantee of independence and their hope for the future. We will look at all the world issues, each in turn, and will make up our minds on the evidence presented to us without committing ourselves in advance to any side. I have sometimes been asked where I stand on particular world issues. To this my reply is that a foreign policy is not developed in a vacuum. We are not yet independent. We have no foreign policy at the moment or the diplomatic resources on which sound judgements can be based. At this stage I cannot answer such hypothetical questions. I can only give you the principles which will guide me. I do feel that my country can in our contemporary world of blocs and groups play a part in bringing about a better understanding among nations. In a sense we should not be unqualified to do so. We are a small people mainly of Afro-Asian descent. We are situated in Latin America but we speak the English language and have strong ties with North America and the British Commonwealth.

In a recent speech Professor Rostow described American policy thus:

"We are dedicated to the proposition that this revolutionary process of modernization shall be permitted to go forward in independence with increasing degrees of human freedom. We seek two results: first that truly independent nations shall emerge on the world scene; and second that each nation shall be permitted to fashion, out of its own culture and its own ambitions the kind of modern society it wants".

That is also my ambition for my country.

TEST OF BASIC PRINCIPLES

In a sense our visit to this country, our request to you for aid, is a test of basic principles. The Government of the United States has stated clearly that their concern is to foster and preserve demo-

cracy, that the internal affairs of democratic countries are their own concern. What then happens when a people by an admittedly genuine popular vote opt for a socialist economic system? Will the United States respect this decision? Will she give aid and succour to preserve that democracy? Or will she withhold her aid at the very real risk of that democracy being overthrown by a dictatorial uprising based on the people's poverty? Will the United States Government give in to pressure groups that exist within it as within all governments and so act as to preserve capitalism by sacrificing the democracy it has so long championed?

There are not lacking, even within this country itself, writers, thinkers, scholars, who hold that when the Government of the United States uses the word "democracy" they really mean capitalism. If these men are right, then we can expect no help, for while we are an admittedly genuine democracy we are also admittedly socialist.

Sooner or later this issue had to be squarely faced and clarified by your administration. History has chosen my own small country to be the focus of this problem. The decision must now be made and demonstrably made.

Indeed, gentlemen, it is not our concept of democracy which is now on trial, but yours.

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Choddi Jagan Research Centre

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