

THE STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE

by Observer

Independence: 30 long years . A time to reflect and rejoice. Why and how we got here? What were the obstacles and pitfalls to attain liberation -- national and social -- to enjoy freedoms and human rights.

Ms Eleanor Roosevelt was a great champion of human rights. While her husband, President F.D. Roosevelt, was fighting with his New Deal works programme to alleviate the brutal consequences of the first major crash of world capitalism -- the Great Depression of the 1930's -- she was vigorously scouring the country in the cause of human rights.

At the end of the savage World War II, as US Ambassador to the United Nations, she was largely instrumental in getting passed in 1948 in the UN the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Later, the UN codified this Declaration into two International Covenants -- the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the UN Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights.

Independence therefore means political freedom, economic emancipation and social and cultural liberation.

GOLDEN ARROWHEAD

On 26 May 1966, the Union Jack came down and the Golden Arrowhead was flown aloft. With our flag came our own national anthem and coat-of-arms. And a dramatic symbol of independence is President Cheddi

Jagan's occupancy at State House -- the same House from which British Governors had signed orders to detain and jail him and so many others in the freedom struggle. Many had been restricted and detained like the heroic Diah Singh, who was incarcerated at Sibley Hall for two years.

The struggle for freedom and independence has been long, hard, torturous and bloody in Guyana as elsewhere. And in that gigantic struggle, patriots received generous international support. International solidarity became an essential component of liberation.

In the American War of Independence, the Founding Fathers received invaluable support from France. And a great Englishman, Tom Paine, took a firm position against his own country and, with his Crisis Papers, fired the blood of the American revolutionaries. Consequently, the reactionaries and traitors dubbed him "a dirty little atheist" -- one of them John Reeve had set up a Society for the Protection of Property against Republicans. Republicans were then deemed as devils, in the same way that socialists, communists/marxists were later characterised.

The formation fifty years ago in 1946 of the Political Affair Committee (PAC) laid the political ideological foundations for independence. The shooting of workers at Plantation Enmore (the Enmore Martyrs) in 1948 became a catalyst. But there were many John Reeves in our midst. Among them was the PNC.

The 1960 Constitutional Conference in London had agreed that the party winning the 1961 election would take the country to independence.

This decision was firmly supported by L F S Burnham. During the 1961 election campaign, he had stated that if the PPP won, he would be going to London in the same plane with Cheddi Jagan for independence. On 7 April 1961, the

New Nation, the PNC organ, published the following excerpt of a broadcast made by Burnham on March 27: "The forthcoming elections are of tremendous importance. They usher in a new constitution under which elected ministers will have absolute power and responsibility for all internal affairs, and which is but a prelude to full untrammelled independence within a matter of months. Yes, Guiana will be independent by 1962."

SOMERSAULT

This created a crisis in the PNC leadership. The Daily Chronicle on 20 July 1961, under its banner "King Drops election Bombshell," wrote: "Mr Sydney King, still named Secretary of the PNC, threw a bombshell into the General Elections scene yesterday. Copies of a publication over his signature stated that he withdrew as a candidate for PNC in protest against Mr Forbes Burnham's statement on immediate Independence for British Guiana and his support for Dr Jagan in this issue, if Dr Jagan wins. The People's National Congress leader, apparently with the consent of the Executive Committee decided that if Jagan won, he Burnham would go with Jagan to London to help Jagan get Independence. King continuing: 'I am sure that Burnham's statement is dangerous to the African people -- I cannot be any part of Burnham's plans. His plan is to help Jagan win Independence. A seat is reserved for him on Jagan's plane, he boasts'."

"So shattering was King's resignation that the PNC issued a statement which was headlined in the Guiana Graphic of July 31: "*Sydney King Is Expelled.*"

"After expelling Sydney King, the PNC released a statement which read in part: "With respect to the grounds upon which Mr King has declared his intention to run as a candidate for the People's National Congress, the Executive Committee declares that it is unequivocally committed to Independence for British Guiana and will not swerve from its present policy which has been accepted by the Congress and the Executive Committee of the Party of which Mr

King was a part. It was advocated by the Party's representatives at the London Constitutional Talks in 1960. Independence is the inalienable right of Guiana, and the People's National Congress, though it will always strive to protect the interests of all groups it will never stand in the way of Independence regardless of the party in office."

However the PNC somersaulted after the PPP's victory in 1961 with 20 out of 35 seats. Burnham renewed the call for proportional representation (PR), which had been rejected at the 1960 constitutional conference in London, and positioned himself for American support.

In 1962, Burnham declared that the PPP government was a "government with obvious Communist leanings that could turn British Guiana into another Cuba". And in New York City early in the same year, he told a sensational lie that there were over 1,000 Cubans in Guiana.

At that time, there was only one Cuban technician in Guiana. Burnham magnified the number a thousand times to create a favourable reception at the White House in Washington, where he met Arthur Schlesinger Jr, President John F. Kennedy's principal adviser.

Later, Schlesinger wrote that he had advised the President that Burnham should be supported and the introduction of the proportional representation voting system was the way to defeat the Jagan government.

This is how he put it in his book, A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House: "Then in May 1962, Burnham came to Washington ... Burnham's visit left the feeling as I reported to the President, that 'an independent British Guiana under Burnham (if Burnham will commit himself to a multi-racial policy) would cause us many fewer problems than an independent British Guiana under Jagan.' And the way was open to bring it about, because Jagan's parliamentary

strength was larger than his popular strength: he had won 57 percent of the seats on the basis of 42.7 per cent of the vote. An obvious solution would be to establish a system of proportional representation. This, after prolonged discussion, the British government finally did in October 1963; and elections held finally at the end of 1964 produced a coalition government under Burnham.”

“After prolonged discussion”, should have read “CIA-financed and fomented strikes and riots”, which had given as columnist Drew Pearson stated, “London the excuse it wanted.”

And the price for Guyana in the immediate pre-independence struggle was high. The Insight Team on 16 April 1967, in a story in the Sunday Times (London) “How the CIA got rid of Jagan,” wrote: “As coups go, it was not expensive: over five years the CIA paid out something over £250,000. For the colony, British Guiana, the result was about 170 dead, untold hundreds wounded, roughly £10 million-worth of damage to the economy and a legacy of racial bitterness.”(to be continued).