

## **Interview with Dr. Cheddi Jagan - February 1997**

President Jagan was interviewed in his office in Georgetown a month before he died by Fred Rosen and Mario Murillo of NACLA via radio hook-up from the studios of WBAI in New York. This interview originally appeared in **NACLA** Report on the Americas, Vol. 31:1. Copyright 1997 by the North American Congress on Latin America, 475 Riverside Drive, Suite 454, New York, NY, 10115 USA.

*Dr. Jagan, you've been referred to in the U.S. press as an unabashed Stalinist and a Moscow-inspired purist, and on the other hand you've been referred to as a former Marxist who has seen the light and is now a converted practitioner of free-market economics. How would you describe your political and economic evolution over the past 30 years?*

Well, I have always associated myself with the ideology of the working class, and I have led a very strong working-class party for the past 47 years. Different people see and call working-class ideology by different names. But what was important were the concrete historical conditions in Guyana and the creation of a programmatic platform that caters to the needs of the working class. In many ways we were different from the mold in which many people placed us, especially the far right during the period of intense political and ideological struggles. For me, Marxism neither was nor is dogma, but a scientific guide to action. It gave me strong ethical beliefs in social justice, particularly in helping the poor, the underprivileged and the exploited.

I grew up on a sugar plantation. Sugar was king. As a matter of fact, it was the gunning down of sugar workers in 1948 which propelled me into the anti-fascist struggle for national and social liberation, and in particular the anti-colonial struggle for an end to foreign domination. We struggled in British Guiana for the right to vote, and later to raise living standards and to try to transform the colonial economy, in which we were just producers of raw materials, sending things abroad and getting very little in return. Today I would say that it's fashionable to talk about the collapse of Marxism and socialism, yet it is not Marxism that has collapsed, but some of its practitioners. There is a great distinction between theory and principles on one hand, and practice on the other. Our practice developed differently in a concrete and different historical context than say in Russia, Cuba or China.

As we know, many mistakes were made due to the wholesale adoption in developing countries of the programmatic position taken in Britain by the British Labor Party. Many developing countries saw their advance to socialism in the rulebook of the British Labor Party, "the public

ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange:" That was the goal for a developed economy. But because many colonial peoples, especially in the British Empire, looked at the British experience and had links to the social democratic Labor Party in England, our practice was more or less taken from theirs. In this regard, I think we made mistakes. We were not creative enough in adopting programs which were in keeping with our own concrete condition. Our concept of Guyana Socialism was premised on plural, peaceful, multi-party states with mixed forms of ownership. This was misunderstood at the height of the Cold War hysteria.

*Given the state of inequality in the world today, where there is a greater percentage of poor people than ever before, do you still see some form of socialism on the agenda in Guyana?*

Well, I would say that socialism has suffered a setback with the collapse of the world's socialist systems. However, there are experiments going on in different parts of the world - in Cuba and China, for example - and now in Russia a struggle is being waged between those who still want some form of socialism and those who want to pursue a capitalist course. So that struggle is going to continue. I would say that the contradictions are now sharpening between Marxism and the neoliberal model which is currently being dictated by the West. This is not the most important struggle that we have going on now. The most important struggle is to seek a new international balance of interests in this period of globalization and liberalization. Developing countries will continue to be marginalized if we do not collectively seek a new global order. Let me just say that socialism is not on the agenda in Guyana. We can speak of a period of national democracy.

*What impact has the clash between the neoliberal model and socialism had on Guyana?*

We have inherited IMF and World Bank programs that were implemented by the previous government. In this regard we are trying to move very carefully because we need balance-of-payment support of \$40-45 million a year from the World Bank, IMF and the developed countries. So we see that there are many contradictions in the austerity model that is advocated by the World Bank and the IMF, contradictions that do not solve our problems.

At our Congress two years ago, we said that we had to walk carefully, skillfully and scientifically between conformity and transformation. Absolute compliance with the IMF and World Bank will lead to the death of many countries, as we have already seen. As a matter of fact,

politicians who follow that model lose. When it comes time for the people to vote, they are thrown out.

*In this careful walk between this "Washington Consensus" and a genuine Latin American agenda, with which you identify, how do you accommodate privatization and low wages to attract foreign investors? How do you feel about these things in Guyana?*

Under recent governments, we experienced privatization along with the devaluation of our currency. A lot of those deals have proven to be a failure. We are examining everything very carefully and not accepting the IMF prescription as the one and only model. We are now talking about privatization of the electric company. And we have said that we don't want a model where foreign companies will hold a majority of the shares, and therefore control of the management and the board.

*How would you characterize ethnic relations in Guyana and how do they relate to the political parties and the political process in general?*

This issue has a long history in Guyana. Before we entered politics in the 1940s - long before Mr. Mandela came up with the formula of bringing the opposition in - we had made several attempts to bring about unity in our country. In 1957, we failed to create a political coalition between East Indians and Afro-Guyanese. In 1961, we won and I tried again. I went to the UN in support of Afro-Asian states to work out the formula, but then the foreign governments were working with [coupleader] Mr. Burnham to put him in power. As the opposition for 28 years, we again tried to bring about some unity but failed. In 1977, we came out with a slogan and a policy proposal called "winner will not take all," even if we win the election. We alone will not form the government. So, the policy is still to bring about unity along ethnic and religious lines in Guyana.

We have signed the optional protocol to the UN on several nonpolitical rights, which the previous government refused to sign. We signed it, and now anyone is entitled to go to the UN with any discrimination case he or she may have. We also have a task force for racial equality, headed by a very distinguished bishop of the Anglican church. He is a respected individual and his task force has produced a White Paper which will be presented to Parliament very shortly. And, might I say, the opposition party has refused to serve on the task force because they hate Bishop George because he has fought for fair and free elections in this country. When that White Paper is debated in the Parliament, we hope to pass a law on racial equality. We hope that cases can then be brought to the Commission, not to the UN or some other international body like the OAS.

People have always said the racial factor is the only political factor here. That is not true. If that were true, we would not have won a majority of the votes in Guyana over 50%. Indians are just over 50% of the population, and not all of them vote for us. In the 1992 elections, there were many irregularities. In spite of that, we won 54% of the votes. Given the peace in the country, I am sure we will break that gap again, as we did in 1953. In fact, when I was sworn in 1992, I said that we would make a new beginning, start where we had left off and bring about what we call "the spirit of 1953," which is about national unity, working class unity, and racial unity.

*You have referred to Cold War hysteria in the United States and the developments that led to your ouster. How do you view the relationship between the United States and Guyana today?*

Our relations are very good with the United States. We are working to achieve a partnership with the North and the South of the world, particularly with the United States, Latin America and the Caribbean. I have praised the United States; the past is the past. The Cold War was a historical process that was going on at that time, and we became the victims. I have no recriminations against the U.S. and Britain even though they helped to destabilize my government on two occasions.

*Many have stated that the new method of U.S. intervention in Latin America and the Caribbean is the war on drugs, and many countries have approved the hot pursuit of narcotics traffickers on their territory. It has also been stated that if Guyana had been in opposition to that, there would be less of a threat to sovereignty. What's your reaction to that and the role that the United States is playing in the so-called "war on drugs?"*

We haven't signed on completely, like some countries that have allowed American agencies to come onto their territory. We have only allowed them airline passage over our territory, but we must be kept constantly informed when these operations are happening. We have taken this position all along in the Caribbean Community (Caricom), and throughout the hemisphere, that we have to act together. When I came to the emergency meeting held by Caricom about the narcotics question, and the U.S. government's way of dealing with it, we took the line that we must not only deal with the symptoms - narcotics production and trafficking - but also with development.

In two important regions in Guyana, the northwest near Venezuela and the south near Brazil, people once produced quality peanuts. But they could not compete against imported peanuts coming into the country. Right now the banana producers in the Caribbean, especially in the Windward and Leeward Islands, cannot compete on the open market.

They are getting a special price in Europe that is being contested by certain free-trade interests. A statement by the former Prime Minister of Dominica makes it clear that if the banana goes - and their income depends nearly 70% upon bananas - then the people will be forced to grow marijuana. In a letter to the World Bank president, I reiterated that statement. Not only will the people be forced to grow marijuana, but they will become refugees to the North. If they cannot get visas to go, they will go illegally. Therefore, we have to treat not only the symptom, but the root cause as well.

When I was in the government in the 1950s, there was no marijuana grown here. But under the last government 60% of the land which was under rice cultivation was abandoned, and the people started growing marijuana. And if we cannot sell our peanuts from these two regions then what are the people to do? Especially when there is a demand in the North for either marijuana, cocaine or heroin. That is why the people of Latin America are growing coca leaves and producing coca plants, which the big drug lords transform into cocaine and then send to the North. In order to overcome poverty, we have to get to the root problem of development. That's my message.

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