



**Tribute to Comrade Cheddi Jagan, his life, time & impact on
Caribbean Political Thought**

Address by Grenadian Senator Chester Humphrey at the annual lecture at the Cheddi Jagan Research Centre on March 22, 2007.

This month will mark 89 years since Comrade Cheddi Jagan was born on March 22, 1918 and for whatever striking historic importance - six or so months after the Great October Socialist Revolution led by V.I. Lenin and the Bolsheviks. Cde. Jagan's impact ever since has been extraordinary, including after death.

It is fashionable to refer to many who have made modest achievements at particular moments in their lives as great. But in the case of Comrade Cheddi, the term `great' assumes its fullest and deepest significance. Perhaps I should give the example of songs. A song may come out one year and be the greatest hit for that year, the most popular, the most profound, the most bought record, or CD. But by the following year no one can remember the tune or the lyrics or even who sang it in many cases. On the other hand, there are songs which have lasted decades and resonate with generation after generation, with new music lovers. Think of the songs of Bob Marley. Compare them with the

ephemeral popularity of each season's pop songs and the message as to which songs and which composer was great and which were merely temporarily popular, becomes glaringly obvious.

Or maybe I should give an example from boxing. There have been many outstanding heavyweight champions of the world over the past hundred years or so. But the one who stands out above all others in the imagination of humanity worldwide is unquestionably Mohammed Ali. And this is not merely because of his extraordinary skills in the boxing ring. On the contrary, Mohammed Ali became a larger than life figure and a symbol to struggling humanity worldwide because he stood up to American imperialism within its very belly and refused to be drafted into an imperialist army, to join an imperialist war against the people of Vietnam. For his stand, he was sentenced to five years imprisonment and was stripped of his boxing crown and prevented from fighting in any of America's fifty states for three and a half years - the peak period in his life as a boxer. It is the individual's fight against the might, the David and Goliath symbolism of such a struggle, the passionate commitment to principle, the preparedness to sacrifice all for the cause, and the capturing of the imagination of one's people and of peoples beyond one's shores; these are the elements which constitute the achievements of greatness in a man or woman.

Cheddi met all the criteria for greatness outlined above. The son of indentured workers, growing up on the main plantation in Port Mourant, Berbice, he knew what suffering and exploitation was all about first hand. From an early age he had to struggle, undertaking many jobs to supplement the family's income. He worked in the rice field at planting and harvesting seasons; cut grass for the cows, helped in the kitchen garden and sold produce in the plantation market; cutting and fetching cane with his father on Saturdays. In the USA a student in the period 1936 - 1943, he worked as a tailor, salesman and elevator operator to make ends meet. Cheddi was therefore able to integrate and make meaning of his experiences both as a super-exploited worker on the fields of grinding exploitation under British imposed plantation economy and as a member of the advanced working class within the very bowels of American capitalism.

As the son of a soil which remained under British colonialism for centuries, he knew what it was like to be ruled and exploited by a foreign power. He risked his life and liberty to

fight British colonialism for Guyana's independence. In the process, he found himself fighting US imperialism, a fact corroborated by the US columnist Drew Pearson.

Cheddi dedicated his life to the fight of the exploited and oppressed and read avidly. In an attempt to understand the world around him and to discern the basis for the grinding poverty of so many he was very early drawn to Marxism. Its theoretical construct and logical philosophical thought armed him with the tools for the battles ahead. In fact Cheddi never hid his Marxist ideological outlook and strove always to apply it creatively. His brilliance as a tactician and political practitioner was just one of his outstanding characteristics.

Comrade Cheddi's return to Guyana sometime in October of 1943 followed his marriage to Janet Rosenberg in August of that year. To me, reading from his works and my own observations and discussions over the years has led me to believe that, that was or maybe had been the final preparatory act in his journey of distinguished and valiant struggle. And any discussion of Cde. Cheddi's life and contributions to the struggle of working people must necessarily reference Comrade Janet as she had been an integral part of his struggles.

From his return to Guyana until his death in March of 1997 while occupying Presidential office, Dr Jagan changed the course of Guyana's history and that of the region. Very unfortunately the scope and impact of his contributions have not been sufficiently recognized and celebrated.

His life has been defined by his passionate and committed struggle to liberate his country from British colonial rule and of course his 28 year long struggle to rescue the nation from the clutches of a rotted neo-colonial corrupt petit-bourgeois oppressive regime which denied the people of his country democracy and real freedom. And which, without argument, has sent this highly endowed land of hard working people dozens of years backward. A point that I've held that is self evident is that Guyana has made its most sustained economic and social progress each time Comrade Cheddi Jagan and the PPP held the reins of state power.

From inception, the road ahead was difficult, complex and arduous. He and the party he founded, the People's Progressive Party (PPP), were thrown out of office at gunpoint on 8th October 1953. On the occasion, after 133 days in office and the implementation of progressive reforms, including the passage of the Labour Relations Bill in the House of Assembly, requiring employers by law to negotiate with trade unions, British troops landed in Guiana. The suspension of the constitution that followed led to four years (1953 - 1957) of "the iron hand and wooden head", a period of colonial dictatorship. During that period the PPP's headquarters was closed down, the militant TUC disbanded and replaced with a "free" TUC, a reign of terror ensued, a state of emergency declared, books banned and hundreds of militants detained behind barbed wire. Yet Cheddi steadfastly continued to maintain the Gandhi policy of passive resistance.

A brief span of the trajectory of his many struggles would see Cde Cheddi, his co-fighter and wife, Janet, and several other leaders and members of his party imprisoned for various periods of time by the colonial authorities. After breaking the restriction order of the colonialists, Cheddi was arrested and brought to trial in Georgetown where he was sentenced to six months imprisonment with hard labour. A few days after his release from prison, his wife, Janet, was imprisoned for six months with hard labour with sentences to run consecutively, to put further pressure on him. In addition, Cheddi and Janet were humiliated by the colonial authorities in St. Vincent when their passports were seized and they were given fourteen days and declared prohibited immigrants; by the same authorities in Trinidad and Grenada. All because of the firm stand he took in support of the working class and working people.

A man who organized his party from the very outset to include all racial and ethnic groups among the working people found himself facing the manipulation of racial and other contradictions within Guyanese society in order to keep the country divided and under the thump of imperialism. After overwhelming victories in three elections in a row - 1953, 1957 and 1961 a new electoral system was put in place in 1964 specifically for the purpose of keeping the PPP out of office. Despite the financing of the opposition by the US and big business, the PPP won the highest number of popular votes. From that election, many blatantly rigged ones were to follow, and for twenty eight long years Cheddi and the PPP were denied power despite having never lost the support of the majority of the Guyanese people.

But Cheddi never gave up the struggle. Neither did he seek what would in the Guyanese context have been a highly attractive but strategically disastrous option - armed struggle. Lesser men would have abandoned the struggle altogether after imprisonment, harassment, character assassination, and close to three decades of rigged elections and, even on one occasion, an attempt on his life. Others would have moved to armed struggle to enforce the rights of the majority of the population to have the government of their choice. Indeed, even America's Declaration of Independence recognized the right of people to use armed resistance in the face of oppressive or minority rule.

In the 1961 - 64 period of strife and disturbances, with the PNC leading the campaign with riots and fire, assassination plots, military training, violent demonstrations, attacks against PPP supporters and even bombings, Cheddi could have justified using those same methods against his opponents who were unlawfully in power. But he didn't. In fact, there were movements engaged in armed struggle throughout the Third World during that period. There was the example right in the Caribbean of the 1970 Black Power uprising; - not to mention, of course, the 1959 Cuban Revolution and in a closer socio cultural political context the Revolution in Grenada of 1979. In the face of all of this, Cheddi had the wisdom, the vision, the ability to see with clarity The Big Picture. He had a clear understanding of what made the Guyanese situation different from all these other situations, even as it shared many features in common with them. And, critically, he had the strength of character, including the oft-underrated quality of patience, to pull off the successful return to power without resort to easy solutions which undoubtedly would have destroyed Guyana in the long run, maybe even in the short run.

Here I must spend a moment revealing a long discussion I had with Comrade Cheddi during one of his visits to Grenada during the period of our Revolution when Caribbean revolutionaries up and down the region would meet in conference and discuss and plan the forward march of our people.

I think the occasion was in early 1981 when I was specifically assigned to take care of Cde. Cheddi during his visit. I had posed that possibility for Guyana as we discussed late into the night the National Democratic Revolutionary Movements and the platform of socialist orientation and antiimperialism. Looking back now I can see and appreciate the genius, the foresight and the mastery of strategy and tactics of Cde. Jagan and the

disciplined contingent of advanced comrades of the PPP which he led. He explained that, that path as attractive and as justifiable as it appeared would have been disastrous for Guyana and very costly to her people both in material and human terms and would have led to the dismembering of the country as imperialism was poised to provoke border claim issues over his country. History records that several years later Nelson Mandela was faced with the same choice and opted for a negotiated end to Apartheid.

These are never easy choices when one is faced with the systematic brutalization of ones people by a corrupt, undemocratic and brutal regime. Many seem to forget the state to which this country and its people were reduced by the PNC. Cde. Cheddi and the PPP chose the long tedious road of mass democratic struggle of building and uniting the Guyanese people.

There are many things about Comrade Cheddi Jagan that were and remain remarkable and worthy of emulation. Let us start with his love of people, because, in a very real sense, all of his actions, including his strategy and tactics in the struggle, were determined from this starting point. Cheddi did not love money or wealth, nor did he crave power for himself. This is borne out by his charge of \$1 for extractions, rather than the Dental Association's \$2 which brought him into conflict with the Dental Association during the period he practiced dentistry.

All his remarkable intellectual and physical, emotional and moral energies were focused on transforming the lives of the Guyanese working class and working people, and that of the Caribbean people as a whole. The formation in 1946 of the Political Affairs Committee (PAC) and the PAC Bulletin by Cheddi, Janet and two others were created for that purpose. The winning of his seat in 1947 to the legislature, making him at twenty-nine, the youngest member of the Council, saw Cheddi debating in the legislature and battling on the streets among the dockworkers, factory, plantation, mines, and quarry workers. He struggled practically alone for the next five years against big business, to break the hold of the planters and Chamber of Commerce. The Enmore tragedy where young men were killed and injured affected him greatly to the extent that he made a pledge to dedicate his life to the struggle of the Guyanese people.

When Cheddi saw individuals, he did not see race or ethnicity or religion, or gender or nationality which is so often used to manipulate and divide people. This is why he was a uniter of people and not a divider, a fighter for people not a striver after personal glory. Whenever Cheddi went to other Caribbean islands, it was remarkable the number and type of people who would turn out at very short notice to any public meetings that he held. On one occasion, when Cheddi held a meeting in St. Vincent's second largest town, way up in the countryside, reachable only with great difficulty on poor roads, hundreds of people somehow found their way from the capital, Kingstown and other towns and villages, to that meeting. On another occasion, when Cheddi held a meeting at the Mona Campus of the University of the West Indies, the venue had to be changed at the last moment because of the huge number of people who came from various parts of Kingston to hear Cheddi speak and to shake his hand. When Cheddi came to Grenada in 1996 for CARICOM Heads meeting, he was greeted enthusiastically on Grand Anse beach in the early hours of the morning when he went to get a swim and exercise. And I personally recall the intensity of enthusiasm when the Grenada TUC held a function in his honour.

I believe that Caribbean people loved Cheddi for several reasons. First, he was for them the Caribbean's own equivalent of Mohammed Ali in the area of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggle. He epitomized devotion, passionate commitment, enormous self-sacrifice and unbowed courage in the face of colonialism and imperialism, and in the struggle to build a new and better society. Secondly, everyone that he met sensed the love he had for them. There was a way Cheddi would look people straight in the eye with a smile of pure pleasure and joy at meeting them. People responded to this spiritual embrace which Cheddi had for each and every one of them. This was a remarkable quality which few have. Thirdly, people admired and respected his lack of bitterness against all who had so grievously wronged him, and his lack of pettiness, a quality; unfortunately so many Caribbean politicians have exhibited in abundance. Cheddi's lack of vindictiveness, of any desire for revenge, made him someone special in people's hearts.

But for me and the vast majority of Caribbean progressives to whom I have spoken about Cheddi over the years, the attribute of Cheddi which stands out above and beyond all others, was his humility. Here was man who was adored, not only by his fellow Guyanese citizens, but by people throughout the Caribbean. Here was someone with a formidable

intellect, internationally recognized, and respected, who had been in impendent Guyana. And yet, in his interactions with all and sundry, his demeanour in every respect was one of humility. There was no pomp and circumstance in Cheddi's way of life, no arrogance. His was the servant style of leadership. "He led through serving; he led in order to serve you. He led not by dictating but by listening to you, by seeking to meet your needs as you have articulated them." This is a leadership that speaks to people not from a throne on high but while it washes their feet. This was the Cheddi Jagan that I knew, that I admired and that I loved. And here is a quote from Professor Clive Thomas in his presentation at a public symposium at the Cheddi Jagan Research Centre, March 6th, 2002:

"I will say from those personal reflections, that I have no doubt whatsoever that Cheddi Jagan was an exceptional patriot, an exceptional trade unionist with a heart readily committed to working-class people and the working class interest. There was never any fault in his ideology. It was always; always a constant struggle and those sessions that I held with him have convinced me that he never stopped thinking. He never stopped searching for new ideas and new approaches. He could always show generosity of spirit and generosity of intellect..."

Yet another profound observation of Cde. Jagan is to be contained in the writings of Senior Counsel, Ashton Chase OE, in his "History of Trade Unionism in Guyana":

"In Dr. Jagan, the workers found an outstanding champion of their rights. The solemnity of the Legislative Council was rudely shaken by his vigorous advocacy of the cause of the workers. He had a passion for statistics. He used these in his pungent and forceful arguments to expose reaction and to lay bare before the workers, the vicious system which exploited them. At sitting after sitting, he assaulted the vaunted privileges of the capitalist. On many occasions, single handedly, but nevertheless most heroically and inspiringly he fought for the workers' rights"

The name Cheddi Jagan came to my awareness very long before I first met him, and the impact of his struggles and thought shaped my world outlook and the views of many Caribbean and Grenadian revolutionaries and political activists. For those in the audience who may not know me, I've had a long history of political involvement in my country Grenada. This activism started at the tender age of ten when a cousin Samuel Herry together with a now QC who had returned from London and was a member of the

Communist Party of Britain, founded a Young Socialist League. This was around the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

I first physically met Cheddi in and around 1972 at a public lecture he gave at the Paramount Building, home of the Oil fields Workers' Union in South Trinidad. I think it was a lecture and book launch. And from then on I followed Cheddi closely reading most of his works and writings. Together with two other young comrades we founded the second Youth Socialist League.

Dear Comrades this gives you a brief insight into the still unmapped influence of this great Caribbean man. Cheddi will live on through the coming generations because his ideas were those which met the needs of our people and which will continue to guide our people's struggle for economic and social justice and transformation. He will live on not only because of the continuing power of his ideals but also because of the model of leadership which he offered to guide us in the present and in the future. He will remain relevant in the decades to come, not only because of those ideas and model of leadership but because of the strength of his character, his love of people and his inspiring example of what a son, a brother, a husband, a father, a man, a citizen, a progressive, a Marxist, and a leader of his country ought to be. It is for all those reasons that the memory of Cheddi and his inspiration for a Guyanese, Caribbean and Third World people will never die.

Undoubtedly, his several writings on political economy, his numerous pamphlets, articles and lectures on a wide range of issues including governance and his books "Forbidden Freedom", The "West on Trial", "Caribbean Revolution" and "The Caribbean-Whose Backyard" place him amongst the great thinkers of the Third World.

Cde Cheddi must be singled out as one of the few statesmen even during the latter days of his presidency in the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the loss of power by the Bolsheviks and within the context of an open Westminster parliamentary democracy, who had the courage to challenge the unrestricted free-market neo-liberal tenets and advocacy of the international lending Institutions.

Comrade Cheddi Jagan was not one drawn to dogma and empty repeat of slogans. He understood the world and applied the science of Marxism Leninism creatively. Thus in

the context of his return to political office to lead and redeem this nation, in the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union he devised a new approach. He called for a New Global Human Order and in August of 1996 he invited me to attend the first delegates' conference.

The challenge to the PPP, to his memory and to his works is for all of us to promulgate the theoretical principles and the tactics necessary to promote this new programmatic platform. Death robbed both him and us survivors of the depth of his thinking on this programme.

In the Caribbean today WE HAVE SEVERAL PROGRESSIVE LED GOVERNMENTS HOLDING STATE POWER BUT THERE IS NO COORDINATING CENTRE; NO CENTRE FOR PROMOTING THE PHILOSOPHY OF LIBERATION. PROGRESSIVES HAVE BECOME FRAGMENTED AND ALMOST LEADERLESS. I challenge the PPP to retake that baton left by your great founder and leader.

Cheddi's place on the register of Caribbean political leaders would proudly record his incorruptible conduct of governance; his modesty and his strong penchant to serve. At the first Conference of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community shortly after his election victory in 1992, he urged his fellow CARICOM leaders to "set our face sternly against corruption and extravagance". He said, "We cannot have a Cadillac-style living with donkey cart economies. Our leaders must set the example of democratic, accountable, clean and lean governance and efficient governance".

Long live the memory of comrade Cheddi Jagan!
Long live the party he founded – the People's Progressive Party!
Long live the Guyanese and Caribbean people!
Forward ever! Backward never!