

Straight Talk by Cheddi Jagan.

PNC CONTROL LEADS TO FRAUD (2)

"The members of the mission concluded that unless this year's election is administered by all the parties or by a completely non-partisan body, another fraudulent election is highly likely".

Borne out at the December 9 elections was this fear of the Joint Mission -- British Parliamentary Human Rights Group and Americas Watch -- to investigate political freedom in Guyana, headed by Lord Chitnis, who had been a member of the International Team of Observers monitoring the 1980 election: it concluded that "the election was rigged massively and flagrantly."

COMMISSION

Electoral fraud is facilitated by two factors: the erosion of the powers of the Elections Commission; the abdication by the Commission of its responsibility.

The Constitution of Guyana and the Election Regulations of 1964 placed full responsibility for the conduct and supervision of all phases of elections in the Elections Commission. It had over-riding powers over all officials concerned with the administrative conduct of the elections, and could issue any directions it considered necessary or expedient for the purpose of ensuring impartiality and fairness.

The 1968 Representation of the People Act disabled the Commission and placed some of its powers and functions in the Minister of Home Affairs and Chief Election Officer.

For instance, in 1964, the Elections Commission directly appointed the Chief Election Officer, Returning Officer, Presiding Officers and other personnel. However, since 1968, the Chief Election Officer is appointed by the Public Service Commission; he, in turn, working closely with the Ministry of Home Affairs, appoints all other personnel.

PARAMOUNTCY

When considered in the context of the doctrine of "party paramountcy", i.e. the government is one of the executive arms of ruling People's National Congress (PNC), this means that the whole electoral machinery is under its control. This accounts for the ease by which voters' lists were padded, supporters of opposition parties were not allowed to vote, polling agents of opposition parties were either not accepted or allowed to be forcibly ejected by PNC thugs, and ballot boxes were tampered with.

Electoral fraud begins with the compilation of the voters' lists. In 1964, the registration of voters was a function of the Elections Commission. To ensure fairness, political parties were allowed to appoint scrutineers, who were paid a small allowance and worked alongside the enumerators.

Under the PNC government, voter registration has been placed fully under its control.

REGISTRATION

The 1968 Act empowers the Minister of Home Affairs to carry out National Registration of all persons age 14 and above. This is done by a Commissioner of National Registration appointed by the Minister. Later, the Commissioner is named Chief Election Officer, who then proceeds to extract the names of persons age 18 and above from the National Registration List to constitute the voters' list.

This procedure led to controversy in the Elections Commission in 1968. The then PPP representative Janet Jagan protested that the national registration list would become the voters' list. The then PNC representative on the Commission, Desmond Hoyte, insisted that it could not be so. He declared:

"... the National Register could not be the Electoral Roll... The compilation of the Electoral Roll was a matter for the Commission... shall exercise general direction and supervision over the registration of electors' ... The Commission had nothing to do with the preparation of the National Register. Whatever might

be the purpose of the Register, it certainly could not be the Electoral Roll. Under the Constitution, the Commission alone was charged with the function of supervising the registration of electors. It followed, therefore, that a Register not prepared under the general direction and supervision of the Commission could not be a register of electors for the purpose of the Constitution."

Despite that declaration, the voters' lists were extracted from the registration lists, with the Elections Commission completely excluded. The voters' lists were padded with dead, underage and non-existent persons.

PADDED

The voters' lists were as follows: /^{298,939 (1953); 212,518 (1957);} 246,120 (1961); 247,604 (1964); 369,088 including 68,000 overseas (1968); 421,575 (1973); 512,500 preliminary and 430,375 final, including 46,921 overseas (1980); 372,000 preliminary and 399,280 final, including 3,256 overseas (1985).

So padded were the 1968 lists that the number of voters increased by 20.9% (local) and 49% (local and overseas) over the 1964 registered voters. In 1973, the increase was 24.5% over 1968. The padding was apparent when official statistics showed an average population increase of only 2.5% per year.

In 1980, there was severe criticism of the huge preliminary lists of voters. These were supposedly "published" (posted up) on October 27, but the PPP, the main opposition party, did not receive them until November 7: 3 days before the closing date for filing objections and claims -- an impossible feat. Finally, 111,500 names were officially deleted and 29,379 were added, with no opportunity for revision!

SCRUTINEERS

In 1985, the Minister of Home Affairs refused to agree to the appointment, as in 1964, of scrutineers to work alongside the enumerators in the preparation of the national register. He also refused to agree to put the birthdate of persons, especially age 18 to 25, on the preliminary list of voters, which was intended to be a safeguard against the padding of the voters lists with underage persons.

The padding was concentrated this time not so much in the preliminary list but in the supplementary list, which amounted to approximately 44,000 names, and with no opportunity for revision.

The supplementary lists had been promised by the Chief Election Officer to the People's Progressive Party (PPP) about a week before elections day. But they were not furnished. Lists totalling 17,000 for 9 regions were given to the PPP on December 8, one day before the election. But the supplementary voters' list for Region 4 (including Georgetown, the capital), totalling about 27,000, was not supplied.

In response to protests, the stock answer was/is: the lists only had to be displayed in such places as the Minister prescribed, and there was no obligation on anyone to send or give a copy to any political party!

CARICOM

The PNC control of the electoral machinery facilitated the ruling party in stuffing ballot boxes with votes for dead, emigrated, under-age and non-existent persons on the one hand, and in disenfranchising non-supporters on the other. By exclusion of names from the voters lists and for various frivolous reasons -- mis-spelt names, wrong addresses, wrong ID numbers -- thousands of voters were denied the right to vote.

It was against this background that opposition polling agents had been forcefully ejected from polling places, and PNC thug violence at gun-point was unleashed against British journalist Anthony Jenkins and myself at Haslington. I had gone there to investigate: a Polling Agent had been ejected from the polling place, and a PPP supporter had been refused the right to vote. Her name was on the voters' list, but her registration number did not correspond with her ID number. An ID card was not a requirement; she could have been identified (her husband had voted); yet, she was not allowed to vote.

For a free and fair election, a completely non-partisan body is essential. In this regard, Caricom can play a useful role.